

2009

## How do beginning administrators navigate through their first year of the middle school principalship?

James D. Cryer  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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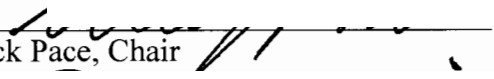
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
HOW DO BEGINNING ADMINISTRATORS NAVIGATE THROUGH THEIR FIRST  
YEAR OF THE MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP?

An Abstract of a Dissertation  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

Approved:

  
Dr. Nick Pace, Chair

  
Dr. Rod Dieser, Co-Chair

  
Dr. Sue A. Joseph  
Interim Dean of the Graduate College

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CEDAR FALLS, IOWA

James D. Cryer

University of Northern Iowa

December 2009

## ABSTRACT

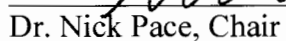
In an effort to understand the positive and negative experiences that principals encounter as they navigate through their first year of administrative duties at the middle school level, this research study examined what events happened during their first year that encouraged the individual to stay in the position or discouraged the individual to leave the position. This study focused on problems and difficulties that arose, specifically associated with the middle school setting. To accomplish this study, three first year middle school principals were interviewed multiple times throughout the year. By collaboratively working with these participants in a phenomenological study, the researcher was able to empathize with the lived experience of each participant and come to know another person in order to check whether his experience of the phenomenon corresponded with another's experience (Husserl, 1931).

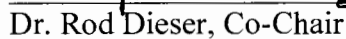
The information from this study will add an important perspective and voice to the literature, that of three beginning middle school principals experiencing their first year of the principalship. Interpretation of the events that occurred during this first year of administrative duties will help prepare future middle school principals or help mentor beginning principals in order to overcome possible obstacles that are presented during the first year of leadership at the middle school level. With this information, professionals dedicated to improving educational leadership will be able to develop strategies that address these concerns, thus increasing the retention of beginning principals in middle school administrative positions.

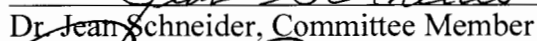
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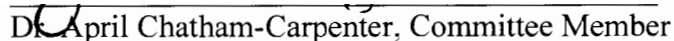
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December 2009

To my wonderful family, Laura, Emma, and Colby. Thank you for your unending support, encouragement, and love. You have been a true blessing from God, and I will forever be thankful.

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I would like to thank each of my Dissertation Committee members for their help and guidance throughout this study. I appreciated the opportunity to learn from each of them in so many ways. I would like to thank my father, Dennis Cryer, for being a true role model and inspiration; not only throughout this dissertation process, but throughout my entire life. I am grateful I had the chance to learn from his expertise as a professor, advisor, and editor, but more importantly, to learn from his example of how to treat people with kindness, compassion, and love. Most of all, I would like to thank my wife, Laura Sohl-Cryer. Throughout this doctoral degree she took the lead in raising two beautiful children, kept me focused on my goals, gave strong writing and editing suggestions, and encouraged me to persevere over each challenge that came along. I will always be indebted to her for her sacrifices so that I could achieve this dream.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### A Day's Walk

"I walked 31,000 steps...can that be right?" I asked myself this question as I looked down at the little orange pedometer buckled on the side of my belt. I knew it had been a busy day, but as I sat down in my office chair I had to question the accuracy of this piece of technology. Our elementary school PE teacher had given it to me as a means by which I could assess whether-or-not I lived a healthy active lifestyle. As the elementary/middle school principal of Price Laboratory School, it was important for me to be a good role model for the students by being active. As I sat in my chair with my feet tingling in my shoes, clearly I had done that job. Considering the fact that it takes me about 2,000 steps to walk one mile, 31,000 steps meant that I had just walked over 15 miles today—in the building. That was crazy! What had I been doing all day? And, why was I over half way to walking a marathon in just one day while just doing my job as a principal?

As I reflected over the day, I saw myself getting to school, going to my office, and starting to check email and phone messages. This was the way I started every day. It gave me a chance to write down items in order to add them to my daily "to-do" list. After that, I went to the front door to welcome students and parents to school as they entered the building. From there I did my usual "walk through" of the building to make sure everything was running smoothly before going back to my office. Next came the often

interrupted and frequently difficult responsibility of finding the answers to the many questions, concerns, and issues that I had written down on my “to-do” list.

Today, I had a parent concerned because the Language Arts teacher would not let her daughter out of class yesterday to go to her band lesson. One of the social studies teachers was concerned that a large number of seventh grade boys were showing up late to his first period class, probably due to early morning basketball practice. My secretary was concerned because one of our substitute teachers had called in sick and would not be able to make it to teach class, so at this moment we did not have a seventh grade teacher for Technology Education class. Our sixth grade math teacher, who was in charge of the “St. Jude’s Math-a-Thon,” was getting anxious because the business secretary had not yet cut the school check to cover the cash donations that students had collected from their sponsors for the program. The high school Drama teacher was upset with the middle school Drama teacher for using \$40.00 out of their budget to buy props for his play without consulting her. And finally, the lunch lady called to let me know that the commodities truck was going to be late so we might have to feed the kids frozen pizza today for lunch instead of the scheduled spaghetti meal.

On top of those previously mentioned items on my “to-do” list which had just been added this morning, I still had to work on reviewing our Crisis Response plan for what to do in case of an emergency evacuation of the building, which the Superintendent assigned to me at our last administrative team meeting. I needed to contact our Central Administrative Office with a question about the medical and dental benefits associated with custodial staff and the union contract. I also had to call the president of the Parent

Teacher Partnership (PTP) regarding the upcoming meeting and her plans for the organization of the annual spring carnival fundraiser. I needed to schedule, with our guidance counselor and resource teacher, the upcoming Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings and our training session involving Nonviolent Crisis Interventions (we had a couple of students who were starting to show signs of aggressive physical behavior and defiance). I was also responsible for helping with the planning and organization of our upcoming faculty meeting and in-service day devoted to our school-wide professional development initiative involving increasing the rigor and relevance of each teacher's classroom content and curriculum.

Then, of course, there was the “big event” of the day—swimming. Right before lunch, I got the call on my cell phone that our one and only male associate who helps supervise the boys' locker room on swimming day just got sick, so if we were going to continue having swimming for the day I, being the only other male who was free during the afternoon, would have to help with locker room duty. So, that meant every half an hour or so I would need to make the trek down to the locker room at the far end of the building to be sure each elementary class of boys was behaving nicely as they changed their clothes before and after swimming. That was where some of those 31,000 steps came from. It was all starting to make sense now.

As I sat back in my chair, now feeling the tingle move up from my feet into my legs and back, I could start to understand how I had reached 31,000 steps. I guess it had been a pretty busy day; nevertheless, it really had not been that much different than most days. There was always some fire to put out or some person who “needed me there...

now!” With a deep breath I continued my reflection, but this time it was not about the business of the day, it was about the business of the job.

Being a principal, especially a principal who is required to deal with middle schoolers, is quite an undertaking. Of course there are the usual day-to-day obligations of helping to manage a school. These are all the duties of ensuring that the school facility is in proper working condition, making sure to answer all of the concerns and questions of parents, staff members, and faculty, and finally, being there to work with students. Given the potentially volatile time period of pre-adolescents, it seems that much of the middle school principal’s daily time is devoted to helping students learn to make better choices after they have done something deserving of being sent to the principal’s office.

And, as I reflected about the job responsibilities of the middle school principal, I began to reflect upon my own preparation for the job. I began to ask myself whether I had been adequately prepared to do this job.

### My Pathway to the Middle School Principalship

My own path to the elementary/middle school principalship started in 1996 when I began my first teaching assignment as a temporary hire while another teacher took an extended leave of absence. I taught American Literature/English for two years at Aplington-Parkersburg High School, a small rural school in Northeast Iowa. Following that, my former speech team coach from high school called me up one day to inform me that a teaching position was going to be opening up at my old school, Price Laboratory School, and I should apply for it. One of my former teachers informed me that if I was hired, I would be able to continue teaching High School American Literature, but I would

also have the assignment of two sections of seventh grade Language Arts. This sounded fine with me, because in college I had an extensive field experience practicum with middle school students, and I had enjoyed it. So, the following May, I applied for the position and shortly thereafter earned the job.

Over the next seven years, I continued to teach both high school literature courses and seventh grade Language Arts. However, after the first year of teaching middle school aged students, I realized that this was where my true passion for teaching lay. I loved the daily enthusiasm and curiosity these students brought to class. I loved that my seventh grade students, when I presented a new unit, would get so excited by the prospect of learning something new, rather than expressing the sense of complete apathy too commonly displayed by high school students at the prospect of a new endeavor. I loved the unique perspectives and quirkiness they brought to class. It was so interesting and fun to talk about life with 12 year olds. I found it personally challenging and professionally gratifying to advise students who were trying to find their way through the murky social and emotional waters of middle school.

As this new passion towards middle level education was developing, I started to see many aspects of the school that I thought needed to be changed in order to help our students. For example, I came to see that our school lacked a truly meaningful advisory program. However, no matter how much I tried to make things change as a teacher, I could never get things completely accomplished. With this perspective I began to think about administration and becoming a principal. To help in this process, I started speaking with the superintendent of my old school. With his help, guidance, and encouragement,



in the fall of 2002, I started into the administrative program at the University of Northern Iowa. Through this program I could not only earn an administrative endorsement, but I could also apply the graduate credit I earned toward the doctoral program in Educational Leadership. This is what I did, and two years later, I earned my administrative endorsement.

At this exact time, during the spring of 2004, an administrative upheaval took place at Price Laboratory School. Our elementary principal decided to take another position, and our superintendent also decided to leave the school. To help rectify the problem that resulted from these sudden changes, the secondary principal (grades 6-12) assumed the joint position of interim superintendent and high school principal. Knowing that I had completed my course work, he asked if I would take the leadership position of elementary and middle school principal. With the blessings of my wife and two-year-old daughter, I agreed.

#### My First Year as the Middle School Principal

The first days of my principalship started with a lot of optimism and excitement. I had spent time during the summer developing a set of goals that I wanted to accomplish for the year. The first goal on my list was to establish myself as the principal. Since I had worked with a number of the faculty members as a fellow teacher, I knew that advancing into the administrative ranks might produce some conflicts. The second goal was to build a stronger feeling of collegiality between the faculty members. The third was to create a sense of ownership and dedication in the middle school. Finally, I really wanted to establish a true daily advisory program. With these major goals, I worked to

prepare for my first faculty meeting that would be held during our beginning of the year in-service meetings.

To prepare for this meeting, I decided to show my personality. I tried to establish a warm environment by softly playing music by John Denver in the background and placing dark chocolate on the tables of the library. I then opened the meeting by using a “My Bag” activity. This was just putting five items in a bag that represented me. I placed a picture of my family, a picture of my wife and me in Paris for our honeymoon, a stuffed Miami Dolphins bear, a copy of “Les Miserables,” and my administrative certificate. My hope was that the items would demonstrate to the faculty members that I was still the same person, but was now in a different role—that of a leader, that of the principal.

Over the next days of opening the school year, I came to see that the staff had taken my introduction as the principal to heart, because almost immediately, I suddenly had a number of informal appointments with teachers asking whether I could help them out in certain ways. One teacher wanted to know if I could get her a new air conditioning unit for her office. Another wanted to know if I could help revise the class schedule so her class could take advantage of an opportunity happening at a local university. My staff members were not the only ones looking to see whether I would be able to help them, but many parents did too. During that first week of school, I had a number of parents calling to see if there could be any changes made in the student lists for each class. There were also parental requests for placement with specific teachers and advisors.

I also began to receive a fair amount of unsolicited advice. Many people came to me with suggestions on all sorts of issues. For the most part, people were glad I took the time to listen to them. However, when I made a decision or did not use the advice I was given, they quickly reminded me that was not the way the previous principal had done things.

Slowly, over the course of that first month, things started to settle down. I began to get into a normal pattern of behavior and system of operation. As expected, the opening “honeymoon” stage came to an end, and I started to get a tremendous amount of student discipline referrals to my office. There were all sorts of problems coming from all sorts of areas. Fortunately, I had spent time reflecting on the disciplinary philosophy I wanted to use with students. The decision I made was to build on a progressive style of discipline. This meant I was going to talk to the students first, get an idea of what had happened, work with the student to see why the incident had happened, and then try to come up with a solution. If this talk did not work, then I would move to a higher level of discipline. I anticipated that this would work well because this was the type of disciplinary system I had used in my classroom as a teacher and it had seemed to work for me then.

Unfortunately, some teachers did not agree. They really wanted me to just put the hammer down on these kids. In their mind, they had already tried the “talking with the kid method,” so by the time the student was sent to the office, there should be a much harsher consequence. I stuck to my beliefs though, and, for better or worse, the year kept moving forward.

Along with the work on day-to-day management of the building and discipline, I started working on some of my major goals. To help build focus and pride in the middle school, I had the staff write a specific vision statement about our middle school. This was very valuable to us because it gave a focus to everyone about why we are teaching at the middle level. It also gave people a chance to work in a positive way with each other and helped build collegiality within the staff.

During this time I also started to set the stage for talks about our daily advisory program. I began by talking to some key people who I knew would be supportive of the idea. I started educating them on the benefits of a daily program. From there, I asked our staff to identify things outside the regular curriculum taught in schools that they believed our students should know before they completed eighth grade. This discussion gave us a list of 50 items. We continued to work together to narrow the focus to those items that were critical. Through many productive discussions, we narrowed this down to 15 competences that 100% of our faculty believed students must have in order to be successful in high school. Once these items were identified, I was able to categorize them within our school's Character Education program. The final mission was then easy to state. We had 100 percent agreement on what needed to be taught. We had a program that could help teach these items. The last thing that was needed was a time to teach these items. Our solution was to create a daily advisory time. In the end we went from less than 75% of our faculty in support of a daily advisory program to over 95% in favor. My first school wide initiative had been a success!

The rest of the spring brought normal daily activities and some added extras. Prior to my becoming the principal, our school community had been fundraising in order to build a new elementary playground area. When the final financial goal was reached that spring, it became my duty to help with planning, organizing, and collaborating on the creation of a wonderful new playground. This was a nice way to continue building collegiality among the faculty, students, and parents towards our school culture and climate.

However, later that spring, I had my final big test of the year as a principal. In May, we took our seventh graders camping for a retreat activity. During this retreat, three boys were brought to me for being very disruptive and disrespectful to one of our teachers. I decided that I would work with the boys, so when we all went canoeing, the boys went with me. While we canoed, the boys really opened up to me about the school year. They were all new to the school and were having trouble connecting during this transitional time period. Further, each of the boys was being raised in a female headed single parent home. Additionally, each of these mothers had to work until later in the evening, so the boys were on their own quite a bit of the time. Because of this, the boys watched movies a lot, mostly silly comedies involving Adam Sandler, Chris Farley, and other Saturday Night Live alumni. Quoting these movies and acting out scenes became a bonding element of their relationships with each other. Upon learning this about the boys, I spoke to them about respect towards their classmates and teachers. I felt the conversation was a good one and would bear positive results in the future.

Unfortunately, the teacher whom they had offended disagreed. She wanted me to send the boys home. Then when she saw me talking with the boys and laughing, she believed I was not taking the issue seriously and that I did not care about her. These feelings of resentment grew throughout the rest of the campout and into the last weeks of school. In the end, I was not able to change her feelings and soon after the school year ended the teacher resigned her position. This was very disappointing to me. I had really worked to build a strong sense of collegiality and bonding among our staff, but there was one person who did not agree with me. This created a mixed feeling of success at the end of the year. I had made it through my first year. I had some success along the way, but in the end I walked out of school feeling rather badly because of this one situation. However, in the end, I was still hopeful that the work needed for next year would keep our middle school moving forward.

### Reflections and Questions

That was four years ago. As I sit here today with the tingle from my aching feet now moving to my forehead and becoming one little spot of pain right between my eyes, I become even more contemplative than usual. I find myself starting to compare today to my first year of the principalship. Am I a better principal now than I was that year? During this time I have walked many steps, which add up to many, many miles. However, I know that tomorrow there will be many more steps to walk. I just want to know if I am having a positive impact or not. I guess the real question boils down to, "Am I making a difference?" Sure I can walk 31,000 steps in a day, but am I taking the

steps I need to take in order to truly make a positive impact on the teachers, the students, the parents, and the school?

### A Developing Crisis for Educational Leadership

Iowa is facing a leadership crisis in K-12 education. At a time when the demands for improving the nature and quality of educational experiences for Iowa's young people are greater than ever, fewer and fewer educators are choosing to go into school administration (School Administrators of Iowa, n.d.). In fact, according to the Iowa Department of Education (2008b), PK-6 and 7-12 grade principals have been considered "Iowa Teacher Shortage Areas" every year since the 2001-2002 school year. Added to this, those reaching retirement age continues to grow with 35.9% of administrators predicted to be eligible to retire in 2003 (Tryon, 2000).

Iowa is not the only state in the United States observing such a crisis in school leadership. According to Andrianaivo, Howley, and Perry (2005), U.S. school districts are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit highly qualified new principals, while at the same time, record numbers of school administrators are now reaching retirement age. According to a 2002 one-question survey completed by National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), responding members indicated that 66% would retire in the next 6-10 years. In a 1999 survey given to principals in Indiana, 67% of the respondents stated that they did not plan to remain in the position of principal longer than ten years. In addition, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported there will be a 13 percent increase in job openings for educational administrators between 2000-2010, and that a large proportion of education administrators are expected to retire over the next 10

years. Tyler, executive director of Maine's Principal Association, explains, "When it once was common to have 40 applicants for a job, now we get 10" (as cited in Million, 1998, p.5).

At the same time, reports also point to a shortage of highly qualified educators that have the knowledge, background, and understanding necessary to lead at the middle school level. According to an online survey of more than 1,400 middle level leaders, none of the principals involved indicated they had majored in middle level education as undergraduates, and only 7% held a Masters Degree in middle level education (Petzko et al., 2002).

With such a problem facing U.S. education in terms of both an administrative shortage and unqualified leadership at the middle school level, it appears that many school boards are hiring first year principals with limited experience, educational knowledge, and personal understanding of concepts specifically associated with effective middle level education. To help gain a deeper understanding of this problem, this study will attempt to analyze the experiences a middle level school principal has during the first year to gain an understanding of how beginning administrators navigate through their first year of the principalship.

### Statement of the Problem

Although educational administration programs across the country are working hard to prepare future principals for school leadership, a review of the literature reveals beginning principals still encounter a number of areas of concern that have not been addressed during their educational experience. In addition, educational administration



programs are not preparing future principals with the specific knowledge associated with middle level school philosophy and instruction. Together these educational deficiencies have the potential to undermine the leadership capabilities of the first year middle school principal as he or she attempts to build school capacity and improve student achievement.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the positive and negative experiences that principals encounter as they navigate through their first year of administrative duties at the middle school level.

### Research Questions

How do beginning middle school administrators navigate through their first year of the principalship?

1. How prepared are first year middle school principals to lead at the middle level?
2. If first year middle school principals do face problems, what type of problems are these, and at what time of year do these problems occur?
3. Do first year middle school principals face problems specifically associated with the middle level setting?
4. Are there events that happen during the first year that discourage the first year principal enough that he or she considers or decides to leave the position?
5. Are there events that happen during the first year that encourage the first year principal enough that he or she considers staying in the position?

### Definitions of Terms

The following terms are defined for the reader of the study: (a) First Year Principalship, (b) Middle Level School, (c) Qualitative Research, and (d) Phenomenological Study.

- a. First Year Principalship—the first year of full-time employment as the head principal of an individual school setting.
- b. Middle Level School—Those schools with a grade 5-8 configuration that have been purposefully designed and designated to educate students aged 10-14.
- c. Qualitative Research— Qualitative research, is “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5).
- d. Phenomenological Study— Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) define phenomenology as the study of the world as it appears to individuals when they place themselves in a state of consciousness that reflects an effort to be free of everyday biases and beliefs (p. 481). In this definition, phenomenological research identifies the “essence” of human experience (Dieser, 2006). Crotty (1998) suggests, “that if we lay aside, as best we can, the prevailing understanding of phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of them, possibilities for new meaning emerge for us or we witness at least an authentication and enhancement of former meaning (p. 78).

For my study, I will be attempting to identify the essence or core meaning of what it means to be a first year middle school principal. To accomplish a phenomenological investigation, Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) recommend the following procedures:

1. Identify a topic of personal and social significance.
2. Select appropriate participants.
3. Interview each participant.
4. Analyze the interview data.

By collaboratively working with the research participants in a phenomenological study, the researcher is able to empathize with the lived experience of each participant and come to know another person in order to check whether his or her experience of a phenomenon corresponds with another's experience (Husserl, 1931). The ultimate goal of a phenomenological study is for the researcher, based on having a strong understanding and personal connection to the phenomena being studied, to better know him or herself within his or her experiencing of the phenomena itself (Gall et al., 2003).

#### Justification of Study

In 2008, according to the Iowa Department of Education (IDOE), principals at all levels were considered a "Shortage Area" for the state of Iowa. Reasons for this limited supply of educational leaders range from a large number of principals retiring, a lower number of eligible individuals willing to enter into vacant leadership positions, and current principals deciding to leave the profession. The justification for this study is an identifiable need to prepare future middle school principals or help mentor beginning middle school principals in order to overcome obstacles that occur during their first year

of leadership at the middle school level. This study will help identify problems and difficulties that beginning middle school principals are likely to encounter during their first year of middle school leadership. With this information, professionals dedicated to improving educational leadership will be able to develop strategies that address these concerns, thus increasing the success and retention of beginning principals in middle school administrative positions.

### Methodology

To gain an understanding of the lived experience of beginning middle school principals, this study used the qualitative research method of phenomenological study. I interviewed my research participants four times over the course of the 2008-2009 school year. During these times I used semi-structured interviewing techniques in order to collect usable data from each of the participants. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed into verbatim field notes.

With these notes, I used a constant comparison method as an analysis tool. This approach allowed me to first compare the different interviews against each other, and later, compare each interview against itself. By completing each interview and comparison, I was able to look for common themes that emerged from each person's experience.

Finally, I took all data that was collected and analyzed and began interpreting the information in order to draw some conclusions about the findings. This information allowed me to write up my final thoughts, consider implications on the field of

Educational Leadership, and make some recommendations for the future as it relates to the middle level principalship.

### Organization of Study

Chapter 1 presents an auto-ethnographic account of the researcher's first year as a middle school principal. Next, the chapter discusses the problems facing education in Iowa in terms of an administrative shortage and unqualified leadership at the middle school level. Finally, the chapter explains the purpose of the study, the research questions that would be answered, the methodology used during the study, and the justification for the study.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature surrounding the shortage of educational administrative personnel, the beginning principalship, middle school education, and middle school leadership.

Chapter 3 discusses the background of qualitative research as it relates to phenomenological methods and the semi-structured interview strategy, selection of participants, and the processes of data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4 reviews the process of data collection and analysis completed throughout the study, and reveals the data that were collected.

Chapter 5 presents the findings from the research.

Chapter 6 highlights implications of the findings on current professional practice. The chapter ends by giving recommendations for future research that could be done to continue to improve educational leadership practice at the middle level.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND PERSONAL NARRATIVES

I began my first year of principalship in the fall of 2004. I was hired as the pre-kindergarten through eighth grade principal at Price Laboratory School (PLS) in Cedar Falls, IA. PLS is a pre-kindergarten through grade 12 school that serves as the laboratory school for the state of Iowa and is supported by the commitment of the faculty and the enthusiasm of the students teaching and studying in the Department of Education at the University of Northern Iowa. Prior to being hired as the principal, I had worked for six years at PLS as the seventh grade Language Arts instructor. In a unique twist of fate, I had also attended PLS as a student from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Because of my many years at PLS as a student and teacher, I was fortunate to have some sense of the history and culture of this school, as I entered the role of principal. However, because my experiences had been relatively limited to this one special school, I believe it is important for me to delve into the experiences of other beginning principals. This chapter is a look at what it means to be a principal through the voices of many authors. Some are researchers who have an understanding of the principalship through years of education and experience while others are first-year principals reflecting on their navigations into unknown educational waters. However, each writer brings to light a different and important perspective on the history and practice of the principalship.

#### History and Origins of the American Principalship

At the beginning of public education in the United States, every town in Massachusetts was required to provide a school with a certified teacher (Kavanaugh,

2005). However by the end of the eighteenth century, due to population growth within cities and the multi-grading of schools, schools needed onsite supervision. This position became known as the head teacher, principal teacher, or principal. It was this person's job to manage all aspects of the school (Kavanaugh, 2005). In reality, the principal was only in charge of a few other teachers and only performed simple administrative duties. Most of the job was still spent teaching classes each day (Pierce, 1935).

In 1839, the Common School Teachers' Association addressed an inquiry to the Board of Education in Cincinnati to determine the relative duties of principal teachers. The committee outlined what it deemed the chief responsibilities of the principal teacher, namely:

1. To function as the head of the school charged to his care.
2. To regulate the classes and course of instruction of all the pupils, whether they occupied his room or the rooms of other teachers.
3. To discover any defects in the school and apply remedies.
4. To make defects known to the visitor or trustee of ward or district if he were unable to remedy conditions.
5. To give necessary instruction to his assistants.
6. To classify pupils.
7. To safeguard schoolhouses and furniture.
8. To keep the school clean.
9. To refrain from impairing the standing of assistants, especially in the eyes of their pupils.

10. To require the cooperation of his assistants. (Pierce, 1935, p. 12)

However, according to Weiss (1992), the term “principal” was not officially used until 1867 when it was used in a school board meeting in Albany, NY.

In their research in 1993 on the history of the principalship, Beck and Murphy (as cited in Shen, 2005) organized the development of the principalship by themes, values, and the tone of the position from the 1920s-to the current time. The following are a summary of their definitions and explanations:

#### 1920—Values Broker

- The principal is released from teaching responsibilities and is now seen as a spiritual, social, and scientific manager. The expectation is that the principal will make many social contacts and be actively involved in the community. The principal receives no formal training in management or supervision.

#### 1930s—Scientific Manager

- Principal preparation programs are instituted. These programs call for principals to use scholarly research to resolve problems and make informed decisions. The responsibilities of the principal move away from spiritual leader to that of administrator dealing with budgets, maintenance, and pupil accountability.

#### 1940s—Democratic Leader

- Influenced by WWII, schools were seen as a place to prepare youth for their role in a democratic nation. This emphasis moved the principal from the role of director to the role of coordinator. There was a focus on human relations and shared decision making instead of strictly scientific management.

#### 1950s—Theory Guided Administrator

- The principal was to focus on the details of running a school rather than the large picture of leading a school. To accomplish this the principal was expected to apply university-based research and scientific management skills with a human relations approach.

#### 1960s—Bureaucratic Executive

- The principal of the 1960s was considered a bureaucrat who held power in the school. During this time the principal became directly responsible for reporting to numerous constituency groups. To accomplish this the principal began to use specific scientific strategies to reach measurable goals.



### 1970s—Humanistic Facilitator

- Rather than attempting to be the boss, the principal worked at being a team player by trying to involve others in school decisions. To facilitate this approach the principal became the wearer of many hats as he/she juggled the needs of many different stakeholders. By focusing on supporting the teachers the principal hoped to create meaningful learning for students.

### 1980s—Instructional Leader

- With the release of *A Nation at Risk* principals became directly involved in the teaching and learning process with the goal of improving student achievement. The principal became the visionary of the school with a mission and plan on how to achieve that vision. From this emphasis on vision and mission the principal became known as a change agent.

### 1990s—Reaching out to the Community

- As the dramatic increase in students who speak languages other than English, growing minority enrollments, and children living in poverty begin to rise in the communities surrounding schools, principals had to work hard to develop stronger bonds between school and community resources. At this same time charter schools and vouchers systems started to develop. This meant that principals had to work hard to maintain the overall enrollment at their public school building.

### 21<sup>st</sup> Century—Age of Accountability

- Due to a dramatic increase in accountability of student performance on state achievement tests, principals began working together with teachers to develop more student-centered schools that connect instruction to standards as well as real world experiences. This combination has changed the role of the principal to be one focused on facilitator with the goal to help all students achieve. (pp. 2-6)

As I reflect on my own style as a principal, I see that the definition of the 1970s “Humanistic Facilitator” captures a lot of how I see myself as a principal. For example, one of the big events at our school is the Beginning Reading Conference. This is a conference our elementary teachers organize and host in order to present strong instructional strategies to other practicing teachers across the state of Iowa. However, in recent years, the attendance at this conference has dropped. In order to increase attendance, I worked hard as a facilitator to help teachers make changes in the overall

structure of the conference. To accomplish this, I had to help survey teachers, principals, and other stakeholders to gain an outside perspective on the conference. I had to work with my superintendent on what direction they believed the conference should go. I had to balance the needs and beliefs of my staff in order to come to some consensus about the conference. Instead of simply mandating “this is how we are doing it,” I really worked hard on validating the experience of each of these individuals with the hope that the knowledge presented at the conference would be used in school buildings in Iowa.

### Educational Leadership Constituent Council Standards

In 1993, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) began studying the research and data surrounding the principalship. From that study, 21 domains related to the principalship were highlighted in the report *Principals for our Changing Schools* (Thompson, 1993).

A year later, in August of 1994, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) was founded. The goal of this group was to find ways for states to work together to establish consistent licensing and assessment procedures. There was a hope that this work would help redefine educational leadership and improve school leadership (Van Meter & Murphy, 1997). Shortly after its founding, the ISLLC began to concentrate on linking activities to standards in order to help in the professional growth of existing administrators (Wilmore, 2002). At this point, the NPBEA directed a committee working on revising the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) guidelines to incorporate the work done by the ISLLC. The result of this action “would provide a consistent framework across all entities working together to improve school

leadership preparation and professional development” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 12). These standards became known as the New Educational Leadership Constituent Council

Standards. There are seven standards:

1. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.
2. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
3. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
4. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.
5. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.
6. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.
7. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by substantial, sustained, standards-based experiences in real settings that are planned and guided cooperatively by university and school district personnel for graduate credit. (Wilmore, 2002, pp. 13-14)

### Iowa Standards for School Leadership

Drawing heavily from the national standards presented by the New Educational Leadership Constituent Council, the Iowa Department of Education (2008a) produced its state standards for school leaders. These standards are:

1. An educational leader promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community. (Shared Vision)
2. An educational leader promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional development. (Culture of Learning)
3. An educational leader promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations and resources for a safe, efficient and effective learning environment. (Management)
4. An educational leader promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs and mobilizing community resources. (Family and Community)
5. An educational leader promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness and in an ethical manner. (Ethics)
6. An educational leader promotes the success of all students by understanding the profile of the community and responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context. (Societal Context; IDOE, 2008a, p.1)

Reading these standards, along with my own experience, convinces me that the role of the principal is an all-encompassing job. There is an emphasis on being the Instructional Leader of the school, but at the same time there is a need to manage the day-to-day operations as well. Further, my job as a principal seems to expand beyond the walls of the school. Of course, while I am at school, I need to perform those endless normal duties that are required on a day-to-day basis just to accomplish the basic responsibilities of my job.

I also have to work at existing outside of that closed educational setting as a person who consistently communicates positively with community members and

behaves, without fail, in a way that constantly dignifies the school. It often seems that my family and I cannot go anywhere in our town of nearly 40,000 without running into someone I know or who knows me from the school setting. It might be a teacher, parent, custodian, another administrator, current student or a former student, or any number of individuals who “know me from school.” However, no matter which person it is, I feel I must always be “on” when out in public. The job of being a principal does not end for me when I leave the building to go home. Even when I have taken off my dress shirt and tie, and I am out and about in my jeans and t-shirt, people from the school and the community know me when they see me. Even if I am going to the park with my kids, getting pizza with some friends, or taking in a movie with my wife, sometimes those parents or teachers still want to talk to me about a concern they have or a problem they think I need to solve. Furthermore, being a role model for students does not end simply because I am off the school grounds. I am always on display as the principal and honestly, sometimes the experience of being the principal is exhausting.

### The Beginning Principals

No matter how well the standards for Educational Leadership are created and written by state departments of education, no matter how well university educational leadership departments adapted state Educational Leadership standards, and no matter how well school districts go about implementing Educational Leadership standards, difficulties and troubles can still arise for the beginning principal. For example, Capelluti and Nye (2004) state:

Being a first year principal is tough. On the one hand, people look to a new principal to provide direction and leadership—often assuming that a new principal

will make changes that will resolve old problems. On the other hand, until a new principal can build trusting relationships with students, staff members, and the community, people will be reluctant to follow his or her lead into trying new solutions. (p. 8)

Prior research has established that the behavior of principals is probably the most crucial determinant of school success (Austin, 1979; Lipham, 1981). Other events in the daily life of the principal can prevent or inhibit considerably, his or her ability to “make a difference (Daresh, 2001). For example, I can remember the day I was working on student academic improvement goals when the dishwasher broke in the cafeteria 30 minutes before the start of lunch. Instead of being able to focus on the larger, and possibly, more “important” job of improving the teaching methods at our school, it suddenly became my job to find enough Styrofoam trays so students could eat hot lunch that day. These types of daily struggles between attempting to improve instruction at the school while still keeping the practical needs of the school under control has been analyzed and described by many researchers and have been defined as the approach of Managerial Leadership vis-à-vis Instructional Leadership.

### Managerial Leadership

Managerial Leadership can be described as overseeing all the daily operations of a school building. This can include, but is not limited to, the budget and financial concerns, the safety of students, scheduling of classes, building maintenance, and bus transportation (Portin, 2004) These are day-to-day realities of the principalship. For example, on any given day, it is not uncommon for me to encounter some “emergency.” One day, the toilet in one of the boys’ bathrooms backed-up and stinking sewage water came spilling out into the hallway. As the manager of the school, when I was unable to

contact a custodian, I had to grab a mop and quickly clean up the disgusting mess before students transitioned from one classroom to the next. While doing responsibilities associated with Managerial Leadership, the principal displays leadership by keeping the school running as smoothly as possible—even if that involves getting a little dirty sometimes.

March (1978) observes, “much of the job of an educational administrator involves the mundane work of making a bureaucracy work. It is filled with activities quite distant from those implied by a conception of administration as heroic leadership” (p. 233). According to Drake and Row (1999), principals spend most of their time on management duties. It has been my experience when people ask me what I do all day long as the principal, I tend to answer that I am in middle management. The superintendent gets to make all the big, curricular decisions, the teachers get to implement these big, curricular decisions, and it is my job to make sure everything is in place for this to happen. At times, I have pulled my fair share of weeds, moved my fair share of furniture, and cleaned up my fair share of vomit in order for the important educational processes to happen at my school on a daily basis.

Very often, the managerial duties are at the very essence of my job as the principal. Sharp and Walter (2003) agree by stating, “if there is no food in the cafeteria, if the rest rooms lack supplies and are not clean, if the bus schedules are not done or the class schedules are not made, we can guarantee the principal will be replaced” (p. xii). It is not that I do not desire to be an Instructional Leader. It is simply that very often I do not have time because I am consumed with managerial tasks.

## Instructional Leadership

“As recently as 15 years ago, principals were largely responsible only for ensuring a safe school building, managing bus schedules, keeping order by enforcing district and school policies, developing master schedules, ordering books and supplies, and other logistical managerial tasks” (Glanz, 2006, p. 1). Although, principals are still required to fulfill these managerial duties, principals are now responsible for demonstrating strong instructional leadership skills that help increase student achievement (Glanz, 2006).

According to Smith and Andrews (as cited in Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005):

...there are four dimensions, or roles, of an instructional leader: resource provider, instructional resource, communicator, and visible presence. As a resource provider the principal ensures that teachers have materials, facilities, and budget necessary to adequately perform their duties. As an instructional resource the principal actively supports day-to-day instructional activities and programs by modeling desired behaviors, participating in in-service training, and consistently giving priority to instructional concerns. As a communicator the principal has clear goals for the school and articulates those goals to faculty and staff. As a visible presence the principal engages in frequent classroom observations and is highly accessible to faculty and staff. (p. 18)

In a practical sense, principals should be able to meet the Six Standards of Instructional Leadership developed in 2001 by the National Association of Elementary School Principals:

1. Lead schools in a way that places students and adult learning at the center.
2. Set high expectations and standards for academic and social development of all students and the performance of adults.



3. Demand content and instruction that ensure student achievement of agreed-on academic standards.
4. Create a culture of continuous learning for adults tied to student learning and other school goals.
5. Use multiple sources of data as diagnostic tools to assess, identify, and apply instructional improvement.
6. Actively engage the community to create shared responsibility for student and school success. (pp. 6-7)

According to Young (2004), “effective instructional leaders regularly observe classrooms, guide lesson planning, create common planning time, monitor student learning, collect data, and use results to influence improvement plans” (p. 51). From this perspective, instructional leaders must understand theories related to learning, quality instruction and methodology, and effective curriculum standards (McEwan, 2003).

As I start my fourth year as a principal, I am beginning to learn how to streamline my managerial responsibilities so that I have the opportunity to become more of an instructional leader. This work has allowed me to have more time to work directly with teachers in order to improve instruction. I have also had specific training in classroom evaluation. This has helped my observation and communication skills. Little-by-little, I think I am becoming a better instructional leader at my school.

Unfortunately, it does take time to become a true instructional leader.

Lael (2002) describes:

All through my graduate courses, I had heard professors emphasize the role of the principal as an instructional leader. But until I spent my first year in the principal’s office, I had no idea of how difficult it would be to achieve and maintain that role. (p. 65)

It was during this first year that Lael (2002), as the principal, learned that constant interruptions are a part of the daily routine. The need to get substitute teachers, make sure duties are covered, discipline students, order materials, meet with staff and parents, hire and fire positions, organize parent teacher conferences, attend school board meetings, complete teacher evaluations, deal with transportation, special education needs, and other school policy issues, all while trying to be the instructional leader of the school, takes time and effort that many first year principals do not understand are part of the job as they enter into the profession.

As a teacher with a lunch period and planning period, I thought the time demands during the day were tough. However, as a principal, I have come to understand there is no lunch period, and certainly no planning period. There is always something needing my attention. Most recently, during my attempt to sit down in my office to quickly eat my lunch, I got called down to the cafeteria to help chase a wasp away from a room full of screaming second and third graders. From the cafeteria that day, I never made it back to my office, or to my lunch. On my way back to eat, I was stopped by one of the first grade teachers who informed me that the bus had not arrived yet to pick her students up and take them on their field trip to the dairy farm.

Whether a first-year principal is able to emphasize Instructional Leadership or is forced to emphasize Managerial Leadership, the job he or she does “sets the tone, mood, and expectations and, if appropriately approached, can start the vital process of establishing a solid foundation on which to build” (McIntyre, 1985, p. 85).

### Daresh's Study

To help understand the first-year principalship, Daresh (1986) facilitated in-depth interviews with 12 first or second year principals, and discovered there were three broad areas of concern:

1. Role clarification.
2. Limitations on technical expertise (procedural/mechanical or interpersonal).
3. Difficulties experienced with socialization to the profession and to the particular school system. (p. 5)

#### Role Clarification

Role clarification is related to the principal's perception that "they really did not know what the principalship was going to be like before they got into it" (Daresh, 1986, p. 7). Many administrators begin their principalship with only a vague notion of what the job really entails. These principals base their image of the principalship on the administrators they have encountered during their education or professional career. This means that a first year principal may bring to the job an image of "the principal" largely based upon one or two specific individuals from their past. Not having a true understanding of the daily role of the principalship creates problems for the beginning school administrator (Daresh, 1986). For example, Sister Maria Jude (1995) explains her decision:

I was asked to become "acting principal" of the parish high school, a school where I had been for five years—two years as full-time classroom teacher and three years as vice principal. I wasn't totally sure how to act as a principal, but I was willing to give it a try. There was no doubt in my mind and heart that it was a right decision even though I had no idea what was to come. (p. 30)

In addition, Drazdowski (1995) relates his experience:

It was only the first twenty-minutes on my first day in my first job as a principal, and already I had found that there was much my professors forgot to teach me in graduate school. My true education had just begun. (p. 42)

In my experience, I never had a true understanding of what it was to be the principal. I was a good student in elementary, middle, and high school, and never saw the inside of the principal's office. In fact, the only time I saw the principal was when he walked around the lunchroom greeting students as they ate. As a teacher years later, the principal observed me only once my first year. He said I did a good job and never came back to my classroom. Finally, during my administrative graduate program I did have some contact with the duties of the principalship in a practicum experience, but quite a bit of that was done on my time, not with direct contact with the principal. On reflection, I am somewhat embarrassed that I went into a profession without a true understanding of the job and duties I was so eager to pursue.

Attempting to understand and clarify the role of the principalship often causes "new principals to question themselves and wonder if they are on a solid foundation and if they have what it takes to do the job well" (McIntyre, 1985, p. 85).

### Limitations on Technical Expertise

The second major area of concern that Daresh (1986) highlights is with limitations on technical expertise related to the principals "feeling unprepared to effectively deal with two areas: (a) procedural or mechanical issues and (b) interpersonal skills" (p. 8).

Procedural or mechanical issues. By procedural or mechanical issues, the principals in Daresh's (1986) study were referring to the problems they were having with the day-to-day operations of running a school. For example, how to read district reports, how to budget time and resources effectively, and how to lead mandated school initiatives (Daresh, 1986).

In my case, a big procedural problem related to using the school's credit card. When a teacher came to me with a request to purchase something for her classroom, I decided to simply give the trusted teacher the school's credit card in order to make her appropriate purchase. However, it was brought to my attention later that in order to follow proper school procedure, I was required to make sure that the teacher had first contacted campus supply to see if they had the item. Then, if campus supply did not have the item, I had to make sure the teacher had checked at the appropriate office supply store, which was contracted out by the University. Finally, if that office supply store did not have the item, I had to make sure the teacher had called the purchasing department at the University in order to have permission to take the credit card to another local store, which did carry the item. As a beginning principal I was asked questions like "How do I buy cow hearts?" by the seventh grade science teacher or "Why can't you just pay me back if I just buy some glue sticks for my class at Wal-mart?" by the kindergarten teacher. It was frustrating to feel like I did not fully understand this procedure or the reasoning behind it.

These are examples of the aspects of Managerial Leadership that deflect from the goals related to Instructional Leadership. Daresh (1986) notes, "if any one single area of

beginning administrators concern could be classified as most powerful, this area of a lack of technical expertise related to procedures was it" (p. 9). For example, first year principal Davis (1988) reflected, "being new to the organization, I was faced with the dilemma of not knowing how many of the practical/routine administrative tasks were done" (p. 75). It seems that no matter how much a principal would like to be the instructional leader of the school and no matter how much the school would like the person to be the instructional leader of the school, these issues related to managing the day-to-day operations of the school cause problems.

These perceptions of having limitations due to technical expertise can be brought on for a variety of reasons. Wilkens (1995) reflects on his perceptions of limited technical expertise during his first year as principal due to a lack of specific educational needs:

I did have a B.A. in English Literature and a M.Ed. focused on administration and planning, with courses such as Public School Finance 344, School Law 312, Curriculum Concepts and Development 377, and Organizational Leadership 308 behind me. The courses were interesting and necessary. Actually, only some of the courses were interesting—but, according to the state certification board, all were necessary. Surely no people on the state certification board were thinking about a rural elementary school when they determined the standards. If they had, they would have included three areas that can be broadly catalogued as Mechanics, Nature, and People. (p. 54)

Another area causing perceptions of limitations in technical expertise comes from a lack of professional experience related to the principalship. For example, Chase (1995) states his perspective:

I was deficient in many areas: I had almost no experience in finance or development, writing for publication, or public speaking. Yet I would have to work with a multi-million dollar budget, raise money, write a monthly column for the school newsletter, and speak to countless student assemblies and parent and

alumnae meetings. I had not hired, fired, or supervised anyone in my previous experience as teacher and then director of admissions. (p. 4)

This perception of being unsure on procedural or mechanical aspects to the principalship causes many new principals to become “too intimidated to ask for help, afraid that it will be seen as a sign of weakness, a sign that they can’t handle the job” (Wilmore, 1995, p. 93). If new principals know that they are having difficulties with the procedural or mechanical issues of their job, but are afraid to ask for help, a serious problem could develop for the school.

Interpersonal skills. Because the first year is so important, beginning administrations must work to build trust and cooperation before working on management issues (McIntyre, 1985). This means both talking and listening to others in order to get things accomplished. However, Daresh (1986) notes that beginning principals experience many problems related to interpersonal skills. For example, problems related to conflict management, relationships between the school and the outside community, and different worries held by teachers. This is supported by Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, and Melton (1993) who reported “71% of principals had frustrations due to communicating with parents apathetic or irresponsible about their children, and 73% of principals who believed they worked with staff that were resistant to change thus preventing them from doing the job they wished to do” (p. 80).

To many people the new principal represents change in the way the school has normally operated. This perceived change can cause people within the organization to become nervous about how the new direction of the school might impact him or her personally (Sosne, 1982). However, new principals sometimes make a mistake and

misread this nervousness as resistance to change or as a personal attack (Sosne, 1982). According to Sosne (1982) when this happens, many principals make common errors in judgment related to building interpersonal relationship, including:

1. Criticizing their predecessor.
2. Blaming an unpopular decision on the superintendent.
3. Trying to solve every problem.
4. Threatening or intimidating staff members.
5. Confiding information about one staff member to another or sharing information only with trusted colleagues.
6. Expecting changes just because it was suggested.
7. Instituting change too quickly.
8. Communicating the attitude that 'you work for me'.
9. Reprimanding the entire faculty for the misdeeds of a few.
10. Reversing priorities.
11. Not anticipating problems. (pp. 15-16)

M. Segar (1995) states his view:

Sometimes I think that people who become principals aren't very good at asking for help. We tend to be the types who, when confronted with a problem, respond with "I'll tackle it," or "I'll get right on it," or—if we've made a little progress—"You're right about that. Let's work on it together." We want to get things done. We have faith in our own ideas and abilities. We like to get right to work. A worthy attitude, but not necessarily always what's needed. And untenable when the demands pile up, as they did so quickly for me. (p. 108)

Page (1995) adds, "I learned that communicating with parents is also a learned art...In that year, I learned that good communication with parents means not only informing them of what you are doing, but also listening to them and keeping the door open" (pp. 67-68).



One of the most difficult experiences in interpersonal communication came for me when I suspended a student for the first time. I was made aware of a situation in which some eighth grade boys had brought firecrackers into the locker-room. Apparently, after physical education class they had lit them and then had thrown them over one of the rows of lockers into another row. The firecrackers exploded on the other side near another student's ear. As the principal, when I heard about this incident, I suddenly became the detective, prosecuting attorney, and judge of the case. This job of talking to all parties involved and then reporting the findings to very concerned parents was an extremely demanding task for a new administrator. I had to communicate with an especially compassionate tone to one family and hope there would be no lawsuit filed against the school. Then I had to communicate with certainty and firm authority with the other family, despite some irrational shouting and screaming on their part, so that a message was sent that this type of behavior would not be tolerated. These were skills I was definitely not taught in my academic school administration program.

Wilkens (1995) suggests that, "dealing with people usually requires the addition of diplomacy. During the past two years I have practiced personal diplomacy, self-defense diplomacy, and international diplomacy. The way to build trust and cooperation is to communicate honestly and directly with people" (p. 57).

Added to this, new administrators might feel some nervousness about the job of being a principal because of a lack of self-confidence in their abilities (Daresh, 1986). For me, this was true around very forceful and intimidating teachers. Being new to so many areas when someone with more knowledge in a particular area spoke critically, I

often did lose confidence. If new principals lack self-confidence, and do not have the ability to use interpersonal skills effectively, they have the possibility of making mistakes that could impact the rest of their career in a school district (Sosne, 1982).

*Socialization to the system.* The last major category of concern facing beginning principals, according to Daresh (1986), relates to “the socialization to the profession and the system” (p. 10). Many new administrators have concerns during their first years with properly portraying themselves in the role of principal (Daresh, 1986). Davis (1988) states his experience:

Although I began the job with a pretty good idea of what my basic educational values were, it was impossible to establish concise organizational goals and develop a strategic plan of action without a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the organization. (p. 75)

Each school has its own climate and culture. As a new person entering that system, there are challenges related to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the history of the school.

It takes awhile to learn about the successes and failures, the personalities of all individuals associated with the school, and the many other routines that make a school a living environment. In addition the principal’s toughest challenge is to create structure, order, and a measure of consistency in a system that is largely loosely coupled, and driven by a continual ebb and flow of needs, values, personalities, and problems. (Davis, 1988, p. 80)

Without this knowledge and understanding, new principals find it hard to sort out the expected professional behavior and protocol to meet the job requirements on a daily basis.

McIntyre (1985) believes the beginning of the school year is filled with instability because many of the teachers spend a great amount of time analyzing, critiquing, and gossiping about both the professional and personal life of the new principal.

Davis (1988) agrees with this idea as he describes, "I was acutely aware of the potential danger in appearing indecisive and uncertain, especially during the initial weeks of my employment as I attempted to establish myself in the leadership role" (p.75).

In addition, Wright (1995) describes his first week as principal as "a marriage and that with any new marriage everyone was nervous, very forgiving, tolerant, and understanding. Knowing that all situations don't last forever, I still wanted this wonderful rapport to last the entire school year. However, by October the honeymoon was over" (p. 34).

Pace (1995) gives another example when he explains, "most of us become principals because we are willing to expend the effort to control well. The challenge is how to share that control with our staff, our colleagues, and our community. I learned to beware first impressions" (p. 51).

As an area of concern for new principals, socialization into the profession and school system is a difficult issue to master. Unfortunately, Hart (1993) suggests for many new administrators, mentoring and induction into a new school system often compares to the sink-or-swim method of socialization. Here the superintendent welcomes the new principal to the building and then leaves the person alone to succeed or fail on his or her own without any help. Because I had been associated with the school for so many years, it was assumed that I did not need any help socializing into the school system.

Unfortunately, because of my newness to the responsibilities associated with the role of the principal and not having an extensive background in elementary education, I did struggle in some ways my first year. However, I have to admit that I did not seek out help or guidance from my superintendent on this matter because I did not want to appear unqualified for the position, or suggest that my hiring had been a bad decision.

### Sparks-Norris's Study

Sparks-Norris (1997) conducted an autobiographical case study of her first year as a middle school principal. From her research, five themes of leadership emerged:

1. A principal becomes a principal by being a principal.
2. An administrator brings to the principalship all prior experience.
3. People problems create the greatest time demands for principals.
4. It is important for principals to work within the parameters of the local school and district.
5. The desire to be the curricular leader is evident early in the principalship. (p. 89)

### A Principal Becomes a Principal by Being a Principal

Throughout the first year, Sparks-Norris (1997) discovered that even if a person completes an educational administration degree, acquires professional development training in leadership, and obtains leadership experience as a teacher, nothing can truly prepare a person for the principalship except taking on all the duties and responsibilities associated with the job. As a person starts into the job of a principal, it takes awhile to understand what the true job of the principal entails.

A person may have been a teacher in a school for many years, but this position only gives the person an external and limited perspective of what a principal does during the day. In addition, a person can complete a full program in Educational Leadership, but many of these programs emphasize theory over practice. It is not until one has had a practical experience being a principal of a school that one can truly understand the position. As first year principals start their new position, there seems to be a short time of extreme happiness after having received a call from the school district. Very quickly, however, this feeling goes away and is replaced by a lack of self-confidence.

Being a fairly new principal currently entering my fourth year, it is not too difficult for me to remember my first year in administration. I can remember this was a time of excitement at starting a new career, but about the same time there was a lot of anxiety from the expectation of being the person with all the answers. I had confidence in my abilities as a leader, but when it came right down to issues of management and instructional leadership, I quickly realized I did not know much because I had not ever done much of this. Over the course of the year, I became very good at telling people I would get back to them with the answer.

Chase (1995) explains his experience:

I started that year with a bag of tricks and a Pandora's box, not of evils, but of inexperience. On one hand, I was generally, at least as far as I could tell, a candidate with whom people at the school were satisfied. I had, for whatever reason, the confidence that I could do a good job. (p. 4)

Buttler (1995) describes yet another experience:

It took almost a week for me to begin to walk on the ground after I was asked to be the principal of Davidson Middle School in San Rafael, California. I soon realized, however, that I had probably gone too far this time, and my ecstasy

shifted to terror. Did I have the expertise to do the job? Perhaps a more experienced administrator would have been a better choice. This was my first principalship—what if I fell on my face! (p. 19)

Levine (1995) gives another example by stating, “when I walked into my office on that steamy July morning, feelings of fear far outweighed the confidence I had exuded during the search process” (p. 11). A final example is given by Hurd (1995), who stated, “the shock and joy that I experienced lasted until Saturday morning when I woke up and realized that I had chosen to do a task that many thought was a losing battle” (p. 24).

As the school year goes on, new principals begin to face many different challenges. From these experiences, these principals begin to gain an understanding about the true nature of the position. McRae (1995) describes his experience:

Of all I have dealt with this year, time has been the challenge with which I have struggled with most. Evening meetings are frequent for me, and I leave our home after eating only to return after my family has gone to sleep...my office usually looks as though a tornado has hit the area, and meeting deadlines for the numerous tasks that go along with this job has been one of my challenges...ensure time for communication while doing an adequate job of management is the balance I am still trying to achieve. (pp. 101-102)

J. Segar, (1995) describes the first year situation:

I wanted to keep my door open, to be available, but I was frequently being interrupted. I was inefficient and I seldom got out of the office to visit classes or go to games. My vision of myself as the benevolent headmaster was fading. (p. 106)

Furthermore, M. Segar, (1995) relates his view:

I kept responding and reacting, eager to solve, to soothe, to please. It took me a while to figure out that I wouldn't be able to work this way for long. Or that if I did, I'd never accomplish anything significant or coherent. I needed help. (p. 108)

Very early on in my principalship, inefficiency seemed to be a key problem that I needed to address in order to be a more productive principal. For example, when any

problem came across my desk or over the phone, my first reaction was to drop everything I was working on in order to solve that problem immediately. It was not unusual for me to rush off to some teacher's office in attempt to solve the "emergency" only to find that the teacher was not there, things had settled down on their own, or it just was not the appropriate time to deal with that particular issue. I encountered many harried moments of regret as I would discover that I had darted my way through students and other teachers across the school building only to find that the problem was not as urgent as I had understood it to be. The high school principal noticed my strife in these areas and encouraged me to use the phone first before rushing out of the office. However, even with this sound advice, it took me a long time to see that seldom are these problems quite as urgent as they are made out to be by the complaining party. Although I still find myself rushing off to take care of several crises each day, I am now much better at determining whether-or-not the issue is absolutely urgent before I go running down the halls.

At the end of the first year, after having had time to reflect, new principals seem to gain a larger understanding of the principalship. This time allows for personal reflection about the year in order to think about how the entire year went. Sparks-Norris (1997) was able to reflect that "a principal becomes a principal one success, one failure, and several more successes at a time" (p.89). Vandermolen (1995) concludes her perspective:

I have felt sadness, exasperation, challenges, joy, and frustration this year. I have also learned about humankind, forgiveness, hardships, working with people, and building working relationships. My heart has ached and bled, but mostly it sang with jubilation at the love that I saw teachers give to children each day. (p. 1)

Hurd (1995) finalizes, “I learned how to share the load so I wasn’t playing all the instruments while trying to lead the band” (p. 25). Mooney (1995) relates, “I made a lot of mistakes that first year and I worked harder than I have ever worked before or since, but I wouldn’t trade that year of frontline experience for any other” (p. 29). Sister Maria Jude (1995) describes, “my opportunity this year was that even though I could not direct the wind, I could adjust the sails and take the ship as far as we could go in the short time we had” (p. 31).

#### An Administrator Brings to the Principalship All Prior Experience

Sparks-Norris (1997) describes her view:

Nothing had prepared me for my first year as principal. As a career educator, the principalship was something I had sought for many years. I had spent years in the schoolhouse as a student, as a teacher working with students, as a curriculum specialist, and as an assistant principal. However, putting all that prior experience together during this first turbulent year required learning by doing. (p. 89)

Her perception of the principal’s job was almost entirely composed of her personal interactions with the principal as a student or as a teacher (p. 95). She goes on to say, “I was not prepared for the totally exhausting job of being a principal. I have never been close with a principal and I didn’t realize the 24 hours a day demands” (p. 95).

Eismeier (1995) relates his experience:

After about fifteen years teaching underprivileged kids in Chicago, overprivileged kids in Brooklyn, and plain country kids in Vermont, I came ‘up the pipe’ to become the teaching principal at a small, rural elementary school. I had begun my teaching career with little more preparation than the proverbial good intentions. By the time I became interested in administration, I had a realistic idea of how schools worked—or didn’t work—and an idealistic determination to improve them. (p. 35)



Kelly (1995) explains, “the six years teaching experience I had gave me a sense that administration might be a possibility. Somehow the thought of being in charge of a school appealed to me” (p. 79). Whether limitations in technical expertise come from feelings related to a lack of educational, professional, or personal preparation, these feelings can be detrimental to the beginning principal.

Skipper (1995) reflects on the first year experience:

I entered the principal’s office, which seemed barren. The hunting and fishing pictures that were still on the wall I always thought belonged to Mr. Johnson, and now I realized they belonged to an earlier principal. I left and went to my office and sat down. The registrar walked in and said, “What about registration and the master schedule?” I looked blankly back at her. She continued, “Tomorrow we will register new students and we have the master schedule to finish!” A feeling of terror instantly permeated every inch of me. I had never done a master schedule! I had visions of the first day of school with hundreds of students who had no place to go! I called the superintendent on the telephone. I told him that the master schedule needed to be completed, and I had no experience in that area. He said, “I’ve never done one either, but I’m sure you’ll figure it out!” I truly panicked at this point. (p. 61)

These descriptions by Sparks-Norris and others of how all past educational experiences are brought to the principalship table clearly illustrate how each principal will tackle his or her job differently because of the differences in those past educational experiences. However, I would further add that principals also bring their past and current personal experiences into the school building with them as well.

As a child of divorced parents raised by my father in a single parent family, I believe I can connect with those students who are struggling in those areas. As an individual who has traveled the world extensively, I think I can connect with those students who are coming into a new school as if into a new world. As a Christian, I know I can understand the difficulties students and teachers address as they tread in the waters

of their own beliefs within a school serving students from diverse religious backgrounds. As a husband and father, I can relate to those teachers who are parents needing to stay home with sick little ones or who do not attend an evening game or concert so they can spend some time with their spouses or families. These personal experiences and others have shaped my personality and make me who I am. And, each of these qualities, both individually and collectively, play out every day in how I do my job and how I communicate with others. Just as much as any educational experience, these things make me the type of principal that I am.

#### People Problems Create the Greatest Time Demands for Principals

Sparks-Norris (1997) explains her knowledge:

the problem of people management had previously seemed deceptively simple. As an assistant and as teacher, I had discovered that simply getting along with people at work was important. Now, however, as a manager, I had to learn how to lead difficult people and to hire qualified employees, skills for which I had never received any training. (p. 106)

Sparks-Norris (1997) continues, “I spent a great deal of time and energy selling myself and my abilities to lead to my supervisors, addressing problem employees, and hiring new employees” (p. 109). Mooney (1995) describes the first day as follows:

Week one was incredible. On opening day there were more than sixty new enrollments. Parents and students were lined up outside the secretary’s office, and a few hours seemed like days before all students were in a classroom. I vowed to have a better system the next year. (p.27)

In addition, Mooney (1995) relates, “I saw some tough cases that first year and often as many as eight to ten on a single day. By Christmas, my parents thought I was going to have a nervous breakdown, and I was” (p. 28). Donaldson (1995) explained, “many new principals, particularly in middle and high schools, feel the same pressure to establish

discipline and control and, in the process, to convince others of their competence” (p. 17). Eismeir (1995) noted, “new principals seem to have a natural tendency to try to please everybody and do everything” (p. 36).

Because of the size of my school, in many situations, I am where “the buck stops.” There is no assistant principal. This means I deal with all the situations each day: kids, parents, teachers, community members, upper administration. All stakeholders come to my door, and I truly do want to make sure that everything is okay for everyone when they walk back out of the door.

#### Principals Must Work Within the Parameters of the Local School and District

Brubaker (1994) describes when a school district hires a new principal it is part of the natural life and evolution of the school setting. It would serve the new principal well to identify analyze all the reasons why the district had to hire a new leader at this specific time in its history. Sparks-Norris (1997) states, “new principalships are a crash course in climate analysis” (p. 116). One of the most important things a new principal can do is to take time learning about the past history and culture of the school prior to starting into the position (Brubaker, 1994).

I entered the position of principal at Price Laboratory School at a very turbulent time. Teachers, parents, students, and other administrators were all a bit on edge because of concerns related to the funding of the school as a whole. Because PLS is not a typical public school funded directly by the state, rather funded by the university, there are university issues to deal with on a consistent basis. For example, I would love to be able to call a single custodian to take care of a simple problem at the school on any given day.

However, because of PLS's placement in the larger university system, I would need to contact a different department (building services, etc.) within the University and hope that assistance arrives as requested. There are also many school improvement initiatives I would love to have funded, but because of how the system works, I simply cannot acquire the funds. My wish list goes on and on. I need to have the playground resurfaced. I would love to have working clocks, repainted classrooms, and windows that are not broken. It would be great to have classrooms in which the temperature is not a distraction to the students (it is always either too cold or too hot!). Because of how the school district (in our case, the University) works, these things are not a priority.

In addition, the leadership organization of PLS has also been difficult for me to adjust to during the early years of my principalship. If a problem arises with a teacher or student, I can implement a chosen corrective response or disciplinary action. However, in reality, I am not the ultimate authority—that person is the Dean of the College of Education. So, in essence, if the teacher or parent did not really care for my assessment and response to any given situation, he or she can easily go up the chain of command within the administration. This “going over the head of the principal” experience, although it has happened only on rare occasions, has been an extremely frustrating experience for me.

Page (1995) explains his understanding:

I had not come well prepared for the principalship... What I did not understand then is that there are certain elements of a school culture—the sacred cows—that must not be changed without great care, if at all... What I learned from that experience was the necessity to examine the role that certain practices play in a school. If you feel they need to be changed for educational or health reasons, you need to find a substitute for the symbolic role that that practice has served. (p. 67)

In addition to having an intense understanding of how the school district itself tends to work, it is also important for a beginning principal to get his/her finger on the pulse of the climate of the school as it relates to the overall attitudes of the teachers and staff. It becomes very clear early on who is going to be a helper and who is going to hinder.

Pace (1995) describes his view:

I made a good beginning. The “agreeables” joined my camp right away; the “wait and sees” within a year. With the help of a perceptive secretary and a small cadre of reassuring staff members, I managed to maintain relatively open communication with the “skeptics.” (p. 51)

However, Vandermolen (1995) “gives four pieces of advice: choose your battles, build upon the successes the school already has, and keep things in perspective” (p. 2-3). In addition, Thomson (1995) agrees when she states:

As a new principal, confident that my progressive ideas about improving instruction and delegating major responsibilities to teachers would be received warmly, I began to understand that my agenda for the school was only one of many. Furthermore, some agendas had long roots leading back for years, confirming that teachers possess long memories that are activated when new principals appear. (p. 90)

#### The Desire to be the Curricular Leader is Evident Early in the Principalship

Sparks-Norris (1997) notes, “I’m looking for some ways that I can be seen, even in this first half of a school year, as THE curriculum leader....I’m so caught up in the day-to-day business that I really have not had time to deal with curriculum as much as I would like” (p. 117). Sparks-Norris (1997) observed that Instructional Leadership takes a backseat to survival during the first year (p. 121). Buttler (1995), agrees when he states:

I was responsible for being an instructional leader for my school, but there was no room in my day for instructional leadership. I had to deal with parent calls,

meetings of all types, district administrators, school board members, and funding agents for the extensive number of programs. (p. 20)

Buttler (1995) concludes his perspective:

As I write this essay, it is now June. I feel as if I have given up a year of my life to survive my first year as principal. I am exhausted, but I don't regret a minute of it. I am proud of my achievements with curriculum and instruction. I had to sacrifice my personal time to establish and maintain a focus of instructional leadership, but the foundation has been laid. (p. 20)

The other area that I was most interested in studying was middle school leadership. As a practicing middle school principal, I have been able to reflect on my own personal background, experiences, and training with middle level education in order to see how they have impacted my abilities as a school leader. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to teach seventh grade language arts for seven years prior to entering into the principalship. This opportunity gave me a chance to work with preadolescent students and learn what it takes to meet the developmental needs of these young people. It also gave me the chance to experience all the aspects that go into developing and running a school setting based on middle school philosophy.

Together these experiences prepared me to be step into the role of middle school principal with confidence in my overall abilities, knowledge, and understanding. However, I began to wonder about other principals. What if they did not have the same experience that I did? What if their background was not in middle school education? These questions led me to look for the most important aspects of middle school education a principal would need to know and put into practice in order to be successful during that first year of leadership.

### Middle School Education

George and Alexander (2003) define a middle school as, “a school planned and operated as a separate school to provide a developmentally appropriate educational experience for students usually enrolled in grades 6-8 or 5-8 and 10-14 years of age, building on the elementary and leading towards the high school” (p. 45).

### Middle School Philosophy

At the heart of middle school philosophy is the belief that students between the ages of 10-14 have different needs than elementary or high school aged students. Because of these specific unique needs associated with preadolescent development, schools “must develop an educational program that is child centered and has a direct focus on the unique needs of the learners as they progress from childhood to adolescence” (Wellner et al., 1987, p. 22).

The middle school philosophy at PLS states:

Northern University Middle School, in order to best serve the educational needs of middle level students, will give equal attention to social development and academic endeavors. NUMS educators will work to meet the individual needs of the whole child and impart skills necessary to achieve success in high school and beyond as life-long learners and contributing citizens. Our school will offer relevant, rigorous and innovative programs that capture the interests of students and encourage them to achieve their full potential. We believe to attain this potential there must be committed engagement from community, administration, faculty, family, and student (Northern University Middle School, 2007).

### Goals of Middle School Education

As students, aged 10-14, are entering into adolescents, they are experiencing significant changes in their cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. To address these changes, middle schools must become “developmentally responsive” to the

needs of each and every student (Wellner, 2004). This belief creates certain goals for those involved in middle level education. According to George and Alexander (2003), “All exemplary middle schools seek to accomplish three central essential goals for their students: academic learning, personal development, and group citizenship” (p. 51).

Academic Learning. Middle school education should attempt to fulfill the main goal of all education—improve academic learning. To accomplish this, middle schools must work to meet all the curricular standards and benchmarks developed for this age group, despite the individual differences students bring to the school setting (George & Alexander, 2003).

Personal Development. The years of preadolescence are both a turbulent and optimistic time in the lives of many middle school aged students. On one hand students are experiencing changes in their physical, mental, and emotional lives unlike any other time before. However, on the other hand, students are beginning to develop their own personal identities. They are making the beginning steps into who they want to be and how they see themselves. One of the interesting aspects of working with preadolescents is that invariably when a student enters the teenage years he or she begins to experiment with his or her physical appearance. As expressions of personal freedom and independence, I have observed middle school students at PLS enter sixth grade wearing sweat pants, Mickey Mouse shirts, and having naturally colored hair only to exit eighth grade wearing black Gothic-type clothes and boots with hair dyed blue, green, or hot pink. It is because of these factors that “each school staff should go further in this area than educators at other levels might believe necessary, attempting to provide a school that



enhances the personal development of each middle school learner, by enriching the curriculum with expanded age-appropriate curriculum choices and activities” (George & Alexander, 2003, p. 52).

Group Citizenship. As middle school aged students begin to develop their own personal identities, schools should work hard to capitalize on this developmental time to “inculcate an appropriate degree of group citizenship, group loyalty, and the perception in each student that he or she is an important part of groups to which he or she owes loyalty, duty, and involvement” (George & Alexander, 2003, p. 52). To be eligible for the extracurricular activities at our school, students must maintain at least a 70% score on their grade report in each of their classes. Unfortunately, some students do not take this requirement seriously and they become “ineligible.” When this happens, I meet with the individual student and talk about the importance of working hard for individual academic reasons, but also because of their duty as a team member. This usually hits home pretty hard for the kids because our student population is quite small, and if one or two kids were not allowed to participate, it could put the whole team in jeopardy. By purposefully dedicating time to group citizenship, students will begin to gain the necessary skills to participate in a democratic society and pluralistic world. “No school can be called a middle school if its principal, assistant principals, and all instructional personnel lack a clear understanding of the goals associated with the middle school concept” (Wellner, 2004, p. xii).

### Characteristics and Needs of Young Adolescents

As a person goes through life there are certain developmental stages he or she must accomplish in order to successfully move on to the next stage (Havighurst, 1972). Because of the unique experiences associated with preadolescents, middle school education is built around the concept that it is the school's responsibility to create a learning environment that is developmentally responsive to the cognitive, emotional, social, and physical needs of each student it helps to educate (Wellner, 2004).

Cognitive Development. Inhelder and Piaget believed that intellectual development progresses through four stages: the sensorimotor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete operations state, and the formal operations stage. However, Piaget notes "learning experiences, social life, and physical development greatly impact the movement from one stage to the next" (as cited in Wellner, 2004, p. 9). Kindred, Wolotkiewicz, Michelson, and Coplein (1981) explain these stages as:

1. *The Sensorimotor Stage.* The sensorimotor stage involves the time of birth to two years old. During this stage the child interacts with his/her environment by using trial and error as a way of building the cognitive process.
2. *The Preoperational Stage.* The preoperational stage is the time of age from about two to age seven or eight. This stage is characterized by the belief that the child's reality is what he or she is able to see and perceive at any given moment.
3. *The Concrete Operations Stage.* The concrete operations stage includes youth from ages seven or eight to ages eleven or twelve years. At the beginning of this stage students use more traditional facts that have been established and cause-and-effect relationships to make sense of their world. However, towards the end of the stage students are beginning to use more "independent thinking and the use of concrete mental operations based on ordering, classifying, and higher order mathematical reasoning" (Wellner, 2004, p. 10) to answer questions. These are the beginning movements towards the areas of abstract thinking and reasoning.

4. *The Formal Operations Stage*. The formal operations stage impacts students from age eleven or twelve to age thirteen or fourteen. During the formal operations stage, hypothesis testing and experimentation become possible as the student grows in the ability to manipulative concrete data and, at the same time, begins to explore the possibilities of applying the concrete to the abstract. As a former seventh grade Language Arts teacher, it was always a fun time each year when I observed students beginning to move from concrete thinking to more abstract thinking. To capitalize on this I would always wait to teach the book, *The Giver*, by Lois Lowry until the second semester of the year. By delaying this book until later in the year it gave my students a chance to let their minds and imagination move away from the exact happenings of the plot and really start to expand to answer higher order thinking questions. This ability of abstract thinking helps in the process as preadolescents move away from parent and adult influence towards a stronger sense of independence. (Wellner, 2004, pp. 47-8)

Other research on cognitive development involves the work of Toepfer (1979) who reported that the brain and body grow at the same time and the most rapid periods of growth for the brain occur between ages 10 and 12 and ages 14 and 16. Wellner (2004) advocates that because it is so important to stimulate, engage, and challenge each individual middle school student teacher should focus more on brain growth rather than chronological age. Further, it becomes a goal of middle school education to provide a setting where students will have the opportunity to experience a student-centered environment where each person can explore their environment in order to make meaningful connections with the world around them.

Social Emotional Development. During the 10-to-14-year age span, preadolescent students struggle with their personal image and self-concept. According to Elias (2001), when students enter puberty changes in their cognitive and social development happen to make middle school a tough and complex situation. This causes stress as students work to cope with all of the new changes they are experiencing (Elias, 2001).

Of the many snapshots of life that truly define the middle school experience for preadolescents, the middle school dance has to be one of the finest. In my experience chaperoning these dances, it is a fascinating drama to observe due to the fact that for many of the students this is the first time they have had the opportunity to interact with members of the opposite sex in such a personal way. At PLS, these dances have consistently begun with the girls talking and socializing on one side of the dance floor and the boys roughhousing with each other on the other side. During the middle of the dance, there have been a few students who work up the confidence to bravely walk across the gym and, at the risk of possible rejection or ridicule of their friends, ask someone to dance. At the end of the dance, those brave souls are often rewarded with the status of being a boyfriend or girlfriend for the first time—much to the chagrin of their parents.

As middle school students begin to develop a view of themselves and their own personal worth, based on feedback of peers, they begin to contemplate who they are and what they will become (Wellner, 2004). This redefining of self has a direct impact on the social-emotional behavior of preadolescent individuals. Often middle school students will appear to go through a rollercoaster of emotions. One minute students will appear happy and content and the next minute these same students will appear aggressive, belligerent, and argumentative (Walley & Gerrick, 1999). Due to these characteristics, middle school educators must be sensitive to the students in their classrooms and work to promote a positive self-image and self-concept development within their curricular offerings.

Physical Development. During preadolescence, middle school aged students go through many physical changes that are associated with the onset of puberty. In fact, the change in their physical development is greater than at any other time in their lives, except during infancy. Middle school athletics are always a strange thing to behold. When I go to supervise the many different games during the year, it baffles me to see how there are so many variations in the physical development of each middle school student on the team, even though they are all within one year of one another in age. For example, in just one boys or girls basketball game, there might be a small prepubescent student with the physical characteristics of a child only four feet tall playing against another student his/her same age who stands almost six feet tall with the physical makeup of an adult. Because their bodies are changing so dramatically in such a short period of time, preadolescents seem to develop a preoccupation with their personal appearance that can cause a problem for these young people. "They have a desire to be the same as their peers, but their differences are all too obvious" (Wellner, 2004, p. 6). According to Wellner (2004):

the differences that occur in the physical development of preadolescents causes many young people to spend much time talking about their bodies and making comparisons of body development among their peers. It is apparent that boys are preoccupied with height, weight, and strength, while girls focus on appearance and social relationships. (p. 7)

From this preoccupation with their personal appearance students can go to extremes in order to fit in with peers. They may experiment with tobacco, alcohol, and drugs in hopes of being accepted by others. These choices can impact the physical development of students and can cause health concerns such as obesity, eating disorders,

inadequate exercise, and poor eating habits (Wellner, 2004). According to Wellner (2004):

lacking an understanding of preadolescents' uniqueness and failing to provide the necessary programs and atmosphere essential to helping them make a healthy and well-adjusted transition from elementary school (childhood) to high school (adolescence) is to revert to the education provided by the junior high school, to ignore the research on the "transescent," and to become a middle school in name only. (p. xii)

### Characteristics of the Middle School

"Middle schools are designed to serve the physical, social, emotional, cognitive and moral development of young adolescents" (Pate & Muth, 2003, p. 17). With the attempt to create a school that is developmentally responsive to the specific needs of young adolescents, the middle school becomes a unique place in education. However, the reason middle schools are unique is not because of exploratory classes, diverse grouping of students or flexible scheduling, it is based on the attitudes and beliefs held by principals and teachers that students at this age are different than other students and thus need a different type of educational setting (Wellner et al., 1987). In fact, Ogden and Germinario (1994) explain that faculty members in effective schools think differently than typical school faculty members when it comes to the purpose of education and how schools should be run.

Wellner (2004) writes:

the common characteristics of a true middle school are devised from several studies and represent the core of the modern middle school. These characteristics reflect the needs and uniqueness of the middle school learner, can provide an increased understanding of the middle school philosophy, and can be used as program goals and evaluation criteria for middle school principals and teachers. These characteristics include:

1. Child-centered, self-paced programs.
2. Core academic programs for all students.
3. Variable class scheduling configurations.
4. Exploratory and enrichment programs.
5. Interdisciplinary teaching teams and planning.
6. Independent study.
7. Guidance and the advisor-advisee program.
8. Intramural programs and physical activities.
9. Social development.
10. Auxiliary programs and activities. (pp. 23-26)

Child-Centered, Self-Paced Programs. Daresh, Gantnen, Dunlap, and Hvizdak (2000) state that it is the responsibility of schools to develop the strongest instructional program possible in order for students to achieve their very best. In the realm of middle school education, best instructional program means designing a child-centered school setting. This means schools need to take into consideration the needs of each individual student. Classroom environments, programs, schedules, and instruction should be designed with the “student” at the center of thought instead of the teacher. To accomplish this goal teachers must understand the needs of each student and develop instructional strategies and assessments that meet these individual needs (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2006). Early in my career as a middle school educator, I worked hard to create an interdisciplinary unit that involved every content subject in the school. This unit was known as the Seventh Grade Chautauqua—an early 20<sup>th</sup> century term for an educational movement focusing on community togetherness. For this unit, each student was involved in the study of “Heroes.” During this study, each student developed a personal working definition of a hero. Once he or she had this definition, the student chose a person to be their hero. The next step was for the student to construct his or her own “Hero-Box.” A hero-box was a six-sided cube that had pictures and writings

about each student's hero. Finally, the students presented their "Hero-Box" to an eager audience of students, teachers, and parents. In the end, many students moved past the point of having a professional athlete or musician as their hero and instead came to see their parents, teachers, or civil servants as their true heroes.

In addition, one of the most important decisions a middle school principal can do is to provide professional development training for teachers and staff in order for the school community to become more responsive to the needs of students (Wellner, 2004). Further, "principals must align the school wide comprehensive, ongoing professional development program and the Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) of staff members with the requisite knowledge of content, instructional strategies, and student developmental factors" (NASSP, 2006, p. 8).

Core Academic Programs for All Students. To meet the goals of Middle School philosophy, "schools must establish the academically rigorous essential learnings that a student is required to master in order to successfully make the transition to high school and align the curriculum and teaching strategies to realize the goal" (NASSP, 2006, p. 9). To accomplish this, all students, especially those from culturally diverse and lower socio-economic backgrounds, must have equal opportunity to engaging, challenging programs and activities (NASSP, 2006). It is here that strong instructional leadership of high quality is essential. "The principal is the key leader who must design an instructional program that will address the diverse needs of the adolescent learner. It is in designing, scheduling, and staffing the interdisciplinary curriculum that principals demonstrate the leadership necessary to make their middle schools into schools of excellence" (Wellner,



2004, p. 161). It is the principal who helps to ensure that the curriculum used to teach students has specific goals and objectives that are effectively organized, planned, and taught (Wellner, 2004). From this perspective, middle schools must work hard to successfully transition students from the self-contained elementary classroom to the multiple classroom experience of the high school setting. If this is accomplished well students will have a better chance at successfully moving from childhood to adolescence (Wiles & Bondi, 2001). As middle schools develop curriculum they need to focus on the specific developmental needs and characteristics of young people (Wellner, 2004).

Variable Class Scheduling Configuration. Scheduling of classes at the middle level should not only work to support the mission of the school but also provide opportunities to serve the developmental needs of its students (Wellner, 2004). To help accomplish this goal principals must work with teachers on creating schedules that are flexible enough to meet the instructional goals of each classroom yet still take into account teaming opportunities, teacher planning time, and other school-wide initiatives happening in the building (NASSP, 2006).

Exploratory and Enrichment Programs. A strong offering of exploratory courses is important to the middle school philosophy. One never knows what classes or content will create excitement and grab the attention of a student. For example, during my last year of teaching, I toiled endlessly when dealing with the behavioral and attitudinal problems of a student who was the most defiant, disobedient, apathetic student I had ever encountered. This student was a real thorn in each of his Core Curriculum teachers' sides.

However, when this student took the Family Consumer Science class, he simply thrived. On his own volition, he would go in after school to work on sewing a new pillowcase, shorts, or sweatshirt. Because of this interest in this exploratory class, the teacher was able to connect with this young man in a way that no one else could in the entire school. This is what makes exploratory classes so important to the middle school concept. Many exploratory classes offer students hands-on experiences within a less structured, relevant curriculum. (Wellner, 2004). To make exploratory classes as successful as possible principals must work with teachers to ensure a high quality curriculum is developed, taught, and assessed (Wellner, 2004). This means the principal must be able to understand the objectives of each exploratory course in order to ensure that course offering is meaningful and appropriate for middle school-aged students.

Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams and Planning. Wiles and Bondi (2001) promote team teaching as “a type of instructional organization in which two or more teachers pool their resources, interests, expertise, and knowledge of students and take joint responsibility for meeting a significant part of the instructional needs of the same group of students” (p. 61). A major component of our middle school is “Team Time.” This is a period each day that our teachers get together to talk about students, curriculum, and other issues related to life in our middle school. We have devoted one day a week to addressing specific student concerns. During this day teachers actively talk to one another about kids and how they are doing in one another’s classes. By using this productive time together, teachers are able to come to an understanding whether a student

is simply struggling in one individual class or having trouble in every class. Either way, the teachers are able to work together and support one another as a team.

By working together, teams of teachers can identify the strengths and weaknesses of students through collaboration and communication. However, to accomplish this, teaching teams need to have very purposefully blocked out the time to work together. Having this critical “together” time during the school day for teachers to meet is so important to successfully implementing the Middle School concept. This structured planning time to meet allows for “teachers to align the curriculum across grades and schools and to map efforts that address the academic, developmental, social, and personal needs of students, especially at critical transitional periods” (NASSP, 2006, p. 11).

However, middle school principals should not just form teams in order to say they have teaming within the building. In order to be truly effective, teams must have a clear purpose for meeting, a specific time set aside to meet each day, and an organized procedure of action (Wellner, 2004). It becomes the responsibility of the principal to then form teams of teachers that will work well together, and give them a common time meet in order to improve the educational experience for each student in the building (NASSP, 2006). To sustain effective interdisciplinary teams, principals act as role models, facilitators, consultants, and suppliers of time and resources so teams can do their jobs effectively. However, Wellner and Wellner (2002) note that the following specific behaviors on the part of the principal are central to team effectiveness:

1. Helping individual teams develop goals.
2. Providing common planning time blocks in the master schedule.

3. Empowering teams to make decisions.
4. Providing staff development for teams based on their needs and interests.
5. Providing block scheduling for teams so that they have the flexibility to make teaming instructionally successful.
6. Requiring all teachers to be member of teams.
7. Allowing teams to have input in the employment of new teachers.
8. Evaluating each team's efforts and accomplishments as well as the efforts and accomplishments of each teacher. (pp. 180-181)

Independent Study. Independent study is a time when students are allowed to study topics that are of the utmost interest to each individual. Typically, independent study is used as a means to enrich the educational experience of an individual student outside the context of a traditional classroom setting (Wellner, 2004).

Guidance and the Advisor-Advisee Program. The NASSP (2006) advocates that “truly effective middle schools need to implement a comprehensive advisory or other program that ensures that each student has frequent and meaningful opportunities to meet with an adult to plan and assess the student’s academic, personal, and social development” (p. 12). To help achieve this goal, principals must be actively involved in the advisory process. It becomes the principal’s responsibility to not only understand the reasons why an advisory program is good for the school, but he or she must also be willing to invest the resources of time, training, and people into supporting this type of program (Wellner, 2004).

Intramural Programs and Physical Activities. With the emphasis placed on meeting the developmental needs of middle school-aged students, “effective middle school principals know that meeting the physical needs of the transesent is crucial to their success as learners and to their social, emotional, and mental development” (Wellner, 2004, p. 197). Principals must work to hire staff members that understand why physical education is so important to the middle school concept and appropriate in meeting the complex and differing needs of middle school boys and girls (Wellner, 2004).

Auxiliary Programs and Activities. Due to the incredibly diverse backgrounds of individual students, middle schools must have a wide range of outside programs available for students and families. To help organize these auxiliary programs, the NASSP (2006) advocates schools and principals use a shared-decision making process when working for the betterment of students. This means the principal must take a key role in building bridges and communication lines between each stakeholder of the school. Wellner, (2004) states, “The principal is the single most important person when it comes to establishing good school-community relations and building a strong public relations program” (p. 341).

Since the middle school philosophy focuses on meeting the developmental needs of its students, many groups of people believe the programs that are created for this process are wasteful and take away from time that should be devoted to strictly classroom purposes. Because of this, principals must be advocates of the middle school concept and help educate those other groups on why these middle school programs are so important to the overall education of students (Wellner, 2004). Farmer, Gould, Herring, Linn, and

Theobald (1995) relate that the principal gives the first impression of the school, its programs, and the character of all those within the building. From this perspective, the principal must understand that he or she is always on duty as a representative of the school and its public relations program.

By having an understanding of the goals of middle school education and its philosophy combined with a knowledge of the characteristics of preadolescent students, I believe many principals just entering the role of middle school leader will gain a stronger foundation on which to build a career. In my experience, when I was able to finally see and understand why middle schools, and the people working day-to-day with the students, needed to be developmentally proactive as well as responsive, I became a much better teacher, colleague, and administrator.

### History of Preadolescent Education

At the beginning of formal public education, the basic format of schooling consisted of eight-year elementary schools and four-year high schools. The goal of this format was to provide a basic education and vocational training to most students, while still helping to prepare a smaller number of students for college (Manning, 2000).

Nevertheless, in 1888, The National Education Association's (NEA) Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies, under the leadership of Harvard University's president, Charles Eliot, argued that young adolescents, who planned on going to college, wasted time in the last few years of the eight-year elementary school and should start taking college preparatory classes sooner (Education Encyclopedia, 2002). With this idea, schools were split into a six-six grade configuration. This meant that elementary school

would contain six grade levels (1-6) and secondary school would contain six grade levels (7-12). However, the NEA's Committee of Ten, also gave the recommendation that the newly configured secondary school allow for college-bound students to work quickly through the curriculum so they could finish their schooling in four years, if possible (Education Encyclopedia, 2002).

### Junior High Schools

This format of schooling continued until 1913 when the Committee on Economy of Time in Education, "Proposed that the 6-6 grade arrangement advocated by earlier national committees be divided into 6-3-3" (Pate & Muth, 2003, p.17). In this structure there would be six grades of elementary school, three years of junior high school, and three years of high school. Following this recommendation school districts across the country switched to the 6-3-3 grade configuration and by the early 1960s there were more than 7,000 junior high schools in the United States" (Pate & Muth, 2003, p. 17). This new junior high format was viewed:

As a way of offering young adolescents a curriculum that was more substantial and more differentiated than that offered in elementary schools, while addressing common practical problems such as overcrowding of K-8 elementary schools and high rates of students leaving school after grade eight. In addition to giving college-bound youths earlier access to college preparatory work, educators in these schools sought to entice greater numbers of noncollege-bound youths to stay in school at least through grade nine by offering them commercial, domestic, and vocational curricula. (Education Encyclopedia, 2002, para. 2)

### Middle Schools

Unfortunately, as school districts began adopting the junior high school format, they also adopted all the negatives of the high school setting: strict curricular options, stressful grading systems, large school and class size, rigid year and class schedules, and

a highly impersonal connection between students and teachers (Education Encyclopedia, 2002). From this understanding, advocates began to emerge proposing new ideas and changes to the schooling format. By the 1960s, many people, who had been working to reform the junior high school model, realized that what was needed was a school that would meet the unique developmental needs of young adolescents (Pate & Muth, 2003). This reform idea became known as the Middle School Movement.

The following 40 years (1960-2000) saw a tremendous growth in the middle school format. The results of this reform movement show that “in 1965 only 5% of middle-grades schools in the United States were 6-8 or 5-8 middle schools, and 67% were 7-9 junior high schools. By the year 2000 these percentages were reversed: only 5% of middle grades schools were 7-9 junior highs and 69% were 6-8 or 5-8 middle schools” (Education Encyclopedia, 2002, para. 8).

### The Outcomes of the Middle School Movement

In October of 1992, Lewis states, “The middle school movement stands out among educational reform strategies because it has a distinct philosophy, a solid research base, a bent for reorganizing that shakes up traditional patterns, and a number of friends in high places, including state and federal policymakers and influential foundations.”

From its beginning, the Middle School Movement has stressed the importance of connecting the academic curriculum to the social, emotional, and intellectual developmental needs of the adolescent student. This philosophy is a corner stone of the Middle School Movement.



Having the belief in this middle school philosophy “led many individuals based at universities, and therefore free of many of the constraints of classroom teaching, to invest in research involving the education of young adolescents” (Lewis, 1992, para. 9). From this research the National Middle School Association (NMSA) was formed in 1973. By 2009 the NMSA had a membership of over 30,000 people (National Middle School Association, 2009).

### Middle School Reform

The outcomes of the Middle School movement have been impressive. However, in recent years the Middle School Movement has come under criticism. This criticism can be directly associated with the Standards Based Movement and the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. Since the early 1990s, middle schools have come under fire. Beane states, “Parents disenchanted with perceived low achievement charge that the middle schools’ child-centered focus gives scant attention to academic achievement” (as cited in Bandlow, 2001, para. 2). Bradley sites a specific example when, “a coalition of parents in Howard County, Maryland pointed to declining test scores and charged that an overemphasis on the social, emotional, and physical needs of adolescents had led to the neglect of academic competencies. In a highly charged climate of confrontation, the parents called for a return to ability grouping, greater emphasis on basic skills, and content regimentation” (as cited in Bandlow, 2001, para. 2).

From criticism such as this, in 1999 the U.S. Department of Education gave seven different organizations multimillion dollar grants to conduct research and work to create comprehensive school reform models for middle and high schools (Norton, 2000). This

reform movement gained momentum with the release of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which found, according to Silver, “a pervasive and intolerable mediocrity in mathematics teaching in the middle grades” (as cited in Norton, 2000, para. 1).

In a remarkably short period of time a number of studies began to focus in on changing the educational experience for middle school students (Norton, 2000). One of these initiatives included a diverse group of foundations officers, association executives, and middle-grades researchers meeting to seek a compatible advocacy agenda. They agreed to organize an unprecedented collaborative network focused exclusively on raising the achievement of all students in the middle grades. After three years of conversation and joint action, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform had become an influential voice in middle-grades policy (Norton, 2000). Clark and Clark (2001) explain:

The current push by government and corporate leaders and legislators to mandate curriculum/content standards, raise levels of student achievement, and hold teachers and administrators accountable for student performance is having a major impact on middle schools in the United States.” (para. 1)

These new middle school reformers believed that the way to raise student achievement was to go “back to basics, decentralizing governance, creating charter schools, dispensing vouchers, or tracking students by ability” (Bandlow, 2001, p. 70).

The most common of these initiatives and the one with the most potential to influence middle level education is “standards-based reform” (Clark & Clark, 2000). In this system schools will be required to adopt:

national standards that apply to every school in the nation and define what children should know and be able to do in math and science at every grade level; replacing superficial math and science curriculum with research-based curriculum materials that teach challenging concepts in algebra, geometry, biochemistry, and physics; and deepen teachers' backgrounds in their subjects to change the way math and science are taught" (Bandlow, 2001, p. 70).

These examples of the criticism falling upon the middle school movement are dramatic, especially the example of the parents in Howard County, MD. The reason is that this school district was one of the first districts in the nation to create true middle schools. From this report and the findings of a consultant study initiated by the district, things have changed. Among the changes were, "implementing 90 minute classes, automated report cards, the return of honor rolls and spelling bees, required reading classes for all students, more specialized teachers, more staff development, and a stricter discipline code" (Brockett, 1999, p. 31).

To crystallize the debate even further, the first school district in the country that made the effort to change all of its junior high schools into middle schools, the Cincinnati Ohio school district, has now made the decision to change again (Brockett, 1999). Due to the fact that many parents were unhappy with the middle schools and were pulling their children out of the district schools after sixth grade, the district made the decision to combine all of their elementary and middle schools into a grade K-8 format (Brockett, 1999). This means that after 120 years of reform for the education of pre-adolescent student, since the 1888 decision of the National Education Association's Committee of Ten on Secondary Schools Studies, schools are returning to a grade 8-4 educational configuration, which research has demonstrated is not in the best interests of preadolescent students.

John Lounsberry (2000) sums it up best by saying:

There are groups in our society whose values conflict with the middle school concept as it moves beyond organizational matters towards full programmatic implementation. Not only is the middle school concept at risk, American democracy itself is vulnerable as selfish and narrow views gain a foothold. The inclusiveness of middle schools, a point of pride to many of us, is not the liking of others. Our advocacy of cooperation over competition does not sit well with many. Our perceived lack of emphasis on a traditional college preparatory curriculum makes us suspect to other misguided but very influential folk. (para. 1)

I think it would be a horrible set back to the education of preadolescent students if schools move back to a junior high format. Having worked closely with young people for over 10 years I know first hand that this is a special time in their lives. Because of this, the system in which they are educated must be special too. To truly engage students and raise achievement levels in all areas, schools must be responsive to all areas of development associated with preadolescents. Teachers cannot just focus on the cognitive development of their students, they must understand the physical, social, and emotional areas too. Each of these areas must be noted and valued in order for a curriculum to be truly engaging to all students. I have seen too many kids bored and hating school because a teacher does not understand the developmental needs of his or her students and forces them to sit in a teacher-centered classroom for 180 painful days in a row. As the instructional leader of the middle school, the principal has an ethical obligation to make sure this does not happen. I hope I am doing my best to help my students find success in all aspects of their lives as they transition from elementary school to high school.

Fortunately, I am not the only one that thinks this way. There has been so much research done on the middle level principalship and the importance of that leadership position. The more I read about the need for high quality people in leadership roles at the

middle school level, the more I came to understand that something must be done to help educate principals at an early stage in their career. In my opinion, this could and should be done at the pre-service time during an administrative preparation program, or during a mentor-induction period of the first year. This way new principals will have the knowledge of the characteristics needed to lead at the middle school level.

### The Middle Level Principalship

The National Middle School Association and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform emphasize the importance of creating high-performing middle schools that are “academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable” (as cited in Thompson, 2004, p. 19). To ensure that middle schools across the country meet this challenge of becoming high performing, schools need to make sure that all students are taking academically challenging classes every day, and that these classes are being taught by teachers who have great experience and great training in middle school education (as cited in Thompson, 2004).

However, according to the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2002), “every educational reform report of the last decade concludes that the United States cannot have excellent schools without excellent leaders” (as cited in Thompson, 2004, p. 20). In fact, in a national study of middle level education, Jackson and Davis (2000) assert, “no single individual is more important to initiating and sustaining improvement in middle grades school students’ performance than the school principal” (p. 157). Thompson (2004) believes that principals need to understand the research about middle school education instead of just understanding the ISLLC standards. By having

this knowledge of the research surrounding middle school education, principals will be able to understand what kinds of conversation teachers should be having, what kinds of professional development training teachers need to have, and what kinds of time teachers need collaborate in order to improve student learning. Keefe, Valentine, Clark, Irvin, and Melton (1993) report that middle school principals who had the greatest success at changing junior high schools into middle schools were the ones who helped create collaboration and buy-in for problem solving, leadership, professional development, teaming opportunities, and shared decision making.

According to George, Stevenson, Thomason, and Beane (1992), successful middle school principals are able to take a strong understanding of the characteristics and needs of young adolescents and use these ideas to create a vision that is appropriate for long term goals of the school. Wellner (2004) agrees, “if principals are to promote quality middle school education, they must have a firm understanding of the rationale for the middle school and a knowledge of the true middle school’s philosophy, organizational structure, and instructional practice” (p. 1). Wellner (2004) continues by stating both principals and teachers must have special training in middle school education in order to work together to provide a student-centered curriculum that meets the unique needs of preadolescent students. Farmer, Gould, Herring, Linn, and Theobald (1995) relate the importance of both the instructional leadership and managerial leadership for middle school principals, noting that principals are the ones who must work to provide an environment that promotes student achievement while focusing on the guiding principles of middle school philosophy.

### Characteristics of Effective Middle Level Principals

Wellner (2004) states the ability of a principal to demonstrate high quality instructional leadership is essential to the success of middle school in achieving its goals and objectives. According to Wellner (2004) the middle school principal must display certain essential knowledge and behaviors:

1. There must be vision and knowledge of what a true middle school can and should be. This requires a firm understanding of the research-based literature on the need for the various components of the middle school, the reasons why a middle school is needed for this particular age group, and the major characteristics (social, emotional, physical, and intellectual) of the transcendent learner.
2. Initiative is required for principals to put vision and knowledge into practice. High-energy, self-motivated leaders drive the initiative to excel, to act, and to achieve.
3. Empowered teachers and effective communications are the mechanics that drive the vision and sustain the initiative. Empowering teachers to make decisions and solve problems about instruction and curricular matters is part of the leadership role of the effective middle school principal. (p. 162)

Clark and Clark (1989) identified the following characteristics of leaders attempting to bring about middle-level reform:

1. A passion for middle-level education.
2. A willingness to share decision making.
3. A concern for the well-being of all persons in the school.
4. An opportunity orientation towards problems.
5. A good self-concept.
6. A model of school norms.
7. An awareness of differences between middle and high school students.

8. An awareness of the importance of continual communications.
9. An awareness of the sensitivity of early adolescent students and their own process of socializing with other students and adults.
10. An awareness of the ebb and flow between the willingness to explore and the need to have the stability of the known.
11. An awareness of the differing demands placed on students because of a changing family structure and resulting moral, social, and ethical dilemmas.
12. An awareness of the need to provide opportunities for students to have a wide variety of school activities in which to explore, participate, and excel. (p. 1)

In addition, Thompson (2004) identifies five areas of competencies that highly qualified principals need to have in order to be truly successful at his/her job. First, highly qualified middle grades principals understand that it is important to have trusting and respectful relationships between all members of the school community. In addition, these principals must have the interpersonal skills necessary to make these relationships effective for the school to improve and grow.

Throughout the year, the middle school teachers at PLS and I work hard to develop a sense of community and a positive climate for our middle school students. One way we try to accomplish this is through our seventh grade lock-in. Our lock-in is a time in September when all of the seventh grade students stay over night at the school. During this time, teachers and students participate in many community building activities and games, and then have a movie night in order to get to know each other better at the start of the year. Another way we build upon this is during our spring seventh grade retreat, which is implemented during the first Thursday and Friday of the month of May. It is during this time that we take all of the students and teachers camping overnight at a local



state park. During this time, seventh grade students once again get to participate in community building activities and games, and also get to celebrate how far they have come from since the start of the year.

Second, Thompson (2004) notes that highly qualified middle school principals understand the power of involving all stakeholders in the creation of a vision that meets the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical needs of each student in the building. I really attempt to use shared-decision making strategies during our monthly faculty meetings. I believe that since the teachers are on the front line of working day-to-day with the students that they should have a voice in the decisions that will effect them and their students. A good example of this was our move to a daily advisory program. As the principal, I worked to educate, inspire, and motivate certain key teachers about the importance of a daily advisory program. From this the teachers were able to really lead the rest of the staff in fully adopting this new initiative.

Third, Thompson (2004) states qualified middle school principals must understand the kind of instruction that 10-14 year olds need in order to do their best while making sure to meet the developmental needs of each student. According to George (2002), while it is the classroom teacher who directly affects student achievement, it is the principal who provides teachers with the necessary support to create a high-performing middle grades school (as cited in Thompson, 2004, p. 25).

Fourth, Thompson (2004) addresses that highly qualified middle school principals must understand the difficulties and challenges facing families today in terms of the economy, changes in traditional family structures, an increase in student diversity, and

morally questionable material produced by the media and technology. Further, principals must work to find organizations in the local community, state, and nation that help serve students and their families.

In response to conversations our guidance counselor had with a number of students related to MySpace.com and Facebook.com, we had a police officer come in and talk to our middle school students about internet safety during one of our middle school advisory assemblies. Many of our students were posting pictures and personal information on these websites without thinking about the dangers. This police officer demonstrated how easy it is for anyone to access a personal webpage and the student's private information.

Lastly, Thompson (2004) advocates that highly qualified middle school principals understand legal policies that help preadolescent students and legal policies that are not in the best interest of helping students. In addition to these five broad areas of competencies that highly qualified principal need to have is the belief that middle school principals must have special preparation and professional development to understand what a high-performing middle school looks like (Thompson, 2004). Unfortunately, even with all the research detailing the importance of middle level principals having a strong understanding of the unique characteristics and needs of young adolescent, too many principals are not educated about the special needs and responsibilities it takes to lead at the middle level.

Even after understanding all the characteristics that effective middle school principals have, I still ask myself "what if?" I wonder how I could have improved my

teaching methods as a seventh grade Language Arts teacher if I had taken courses in a middle level endorsement program. I wonder if I would have had the opportunity to experience training during my administrative preparation program specifically devoted to middle level leadership, would I be a stronger principal today? I think I do a good job, but if the first year of leadership sets the tone for the rest of my career, could my first year have been more effective? I know the answer to each of these questions is “yes.” With more direct training, I could have been a better middle school teacher and administrator.

#### Special Responsibilities Needed to Lead at the Middle Level

In an on-line survey of more than 1,400 middle level leaders, “none of the principals indicated that they had majored in middle level education as undergraduates and only 7% held a master’s degree in middle level education” (Petzko et al., 2002, p. 5). My undergraduate degree is in English and my Master’s Degree is in Teaching with an emphasis in English Education.

When asked how many classes they had taken that explicitly focused on middle level education, “37% of principals responded that they had not taken any such courses, followed closely by 34% who had taken one or two courses, and 20% who had taken three to five courses” (Petzko et al., 2002, p. 5). While at the University of Iowa working on my Masters in Teaching, I took two courses that specifically focused on middle level education: Young Adolescent Literature and Language and Learning. The rest of my coursework was devoted to standard educational matters.

Without the proper education, beginning middle school principals will run into not only administrative roadblocks typical to the first year on the job, but in addition, they will run into administrative roadblocks that are specific to the middle level. For example, according to Eichhorn (1966), “recruitment of personnel is a key factor in developing a successful middle school staff. Because transescents have unique needs, this endeavor takes on particular importance. Fundamental to the acquisition of a competent staff is an understanding of the character and goals of the school in relation to a potential staff member’s personal and professional qualifications” (p. 91).

#### Roadblocks to the Middle Level Principalship

With all the research done on the first year experience of principals, there are certain aspects of leadership that connect directly to the middle level principalship. Valentine, Trimble, and Whitaker (1993) state “there were certain factors that could be considered ‘roadblocks’ preventing principals from doing the job they wished to do. Analysis of the data showed that two-thirds of the principals identified the following factors as either moderate or extreme roadblocks:

1. Inability to obtain funding (86 percent)
2. Time taken by administrative detail at the expense of more important matters (85 percent)
3. Lack of time for myself (80 percent)
4. Regulations/mandates from state/district governing boards (79 percent)
5. Inability to provide teacher time for planning or professional development (74 percent)

6. Resistance to change (73 percent)
7. Variations in the ability and dedication of staff (71 percent)
8. Parents apathetic or irresponsible about their children (71 percent)
9. Lack of knowledge among staff regarding program for middle level students (68 percent)
10. Insufficient space and facilities (66 percent; p. 80)

If I were to take this survey, I, too, would note each of these areas as moderate or extreme roadblocks to the job I am trying to do as a middle level principal. The one area that seems to be improving, though, is the knowledge of my staff regarding programming for middle level students. At the University of Northern Iowa, we have a middle level endorsement program for undergraduate students. This program has really helped improve the knowledge of adolescent developmental needs in my beginning teachers. This program has demonstrated to me the effectiveness of having an educational program devoted to middle level instruction. Based upon this observation, I hope educational leadership programs around the country will work to adopt similar endorsement programs for future principals that will work in middle school settings.

In fact, Lucas, Valentine, and Little (2001) established, if a principal is to be truly effective at creating authentic and long-lasting change and commitment at the middle level, he or she must be educated towards the following six essential imperatives:

1. Eliciting the school's values, beliefs, and mission.
2. Developing best practice knowledge and commitment.
3. Shaping a collaborative vision and goals for the school.

4. Collecting, analyzing, and interpreting school data.
5. Developing plans to accomplish school goals.
6. Enabling and monitoring the school's action plans. (p. 12)

Each of these skills are needed at all levels of administration, but until an administrator has the specific background knowledge of middle level education, he or she will have difficulties applying these skills appropriately for the lasting change needed.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the positive and negative experiences that principals encounter as they navigated through their first year of administrative duties at the middle school level. Three school principals were selected for participation in this study based on their educational status as beginning their first year of head administrative duties in a middle level school setting. The focus of this study was to gain in-depth knowledge related to the lived experience of beginning middle school administrators. The appropriate research design was a qualitative study utilizing phenomenological methods.

#### The Research Problem

Although educational administration programs across the country are working hard to prepare future principals for school leadership, a review of the literature reveals beginning principals still encounter a number of areas of concern that have not been addressed during their educational experience. In addition, educational administration programs are not preparing future principals with the specific knowledge associated with middle level school philosophy and instruction. Together these educational deficiencies have the potential to undermine the leadership capabilities of first year middle school principals as they attempt to build school capacity and improve student achievement.

### Research Questions

The significant research questions surrounding this study are:

1. How prepared are first year middle school principals to lead at the middle level?
2. If first year middle school principals do face problems, what type of problems are these, and at what time of year do these problems occur?
3. Do first year middle school principals face problems specifically associated with the middle level setting?
4. Are there events that happen during the first year that discourage the first year middle school principal enough so he or she considers or decides to leave the position?
5. If someone has taken the step to become a middle school principal, what happens during the first year that encourages the individual to stay in the position of school leader?

### Research Design

To accomplish the data collection process this study used qualitative research.

Qualitative research, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5).



### Phenomenological Study

Phenomenological methodology was used as the basis for the study. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) define phenomenology as “the study of the world as it appears to individuals when they place themselves in a state of consciousness that reflects an effort to be free of everyday biases and beliefs” (p. 481). In this definition, phenomenological research identifies the “essence” of human experience (Dieser, 2006). Crotty (1998) describes “essence” as the core meaning of an experience. This study will attempt to identify the essence or core meaning of what it means to be a first year middle school principal. To accomplish a phenomenological investigation, Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) recommend using the following procedures:

1. Identify a topic of personal and social significance.
2. Select appropriate participants.
3. Interview each participant.
4. Analyze the interview data.

By collaboratively working with the research participants in a phenomenological study the researcher is able to empathize with the lived experience of each participant and come to know another person in order to check whether his or her experience of a phenomenon corresponds with another’s experience (Husserl, 1931). The ultimate goal of a phenomenological study is for the researcher, based on having a strong understanding and personal connection to the phenomena being studied, to better know him/herself within his/her experiencing of the phenomena itself (Gall et al., 2003).

### Description of Participants

To accomplish this study, three participants were selected based upon the use of a purposive sample with two criteria. First, in order to create as similar a situation to my own experience, research participants needed to be first year principals specifically located at a middle school. Second, they needed to be first year principals located in Iowa, and specifically in small rural schools. According to Patton (2002) a purposive sample should be used when a researcher selects people he/she believes will provide the best information relevant to the topic at hand. The school principals were randomly selected for participation in this study based on their educational status as beginning their first year of head administrative duties in a middle level school setting. Each school is approximately the same in terms of facilities, enrollment, and demographics of the population. For this study, pseudonyms were used for all participant, school, and locations.

#### Principal #1

Susan is a 41 years old Caucasian woman. She is about 5'4" tall with a small body frame. She has blond hair, cut short to her shoulders and always looks very polished with hair and makeup done just right. Susan grew up on a cattle farm before going to college. She has been married for 14 years to a farmer in Iowa and has three children. As a career, Susan taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts for seventeen years prior to starting her first year of the principalship. The school she taught at was a middle school in Minnesota that had about 1000 kids total. She also coached track and volleyball. She completed a Master in Elementary Education with a Middle School endorsement in 1999.

Following that she completed another Master's degree in Administration at a state university in Minnesota during the summer of 2008. Susan is currently in her first year as principal of a grade 5-8 middle school in Western, Iowa.

### Principal #2

Marty is a 35 years old Caucasian woman. She is 5'8'' tall with long features. She has blond hair that falls below her shoulders. Marty doesn't wear a lot of make up and dresses very comfortably. She is single and doesn't have any children. After college Marty worked in the mental health field and as a federal grant administrator prior to being in education. Upon completion of her Bachelor's degree in education, she taught primary reading for two years at an elementary school. During this time she started working on her administration certificate at a state university in Iowa. While she earned this certificate, she was hired as a 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading teacher and the Dean of Students at a grade 5-8 middle school in Eastern, Iowa. After completing her administrative certificate, she was officially hired in 2008 as the head principal of the same middle school she had worked as teacher and Dean of Students.

### Principal #3

Karen is a 43 year old Caucasian woman. She is about 5'7'' tall with an athletic body structure. She has curly brown hair that falls below her shoulders. Karen doesn't wear a lot of make up and dresses very comfortably. She has been married for 15 years and has three children. Karen has been in education for 21 years. She started her career teaching German and Vocal music for nine years at the middle and high school levels. She then earned her Masters in Counseling during that time. Following this she became

the K-12 guidance counselor at for an entire school district located in Central, Iowa. She worked in this position for six years. During this time the district started a whole grade sharing agreement and Karen moved to the elementary and middle school where she continued working for the next five years as the K-8 counselor. While in this position Karen completed her administrative degree from a state university in Iowa and was hired as the head middle school principal at the same school she had been working at as a counselor.

### Data Collection

The format used to collect data was a semi-structured interview process that involved four one-hour face-to-face interviews with each of the three individuals chosen for the study at an onsite school location. The respondent selected the specific school site for the interview. Table 1 explains the schedule and interview dates:

Table 1

The Date of Each Scheduled Interview

Interview Schedule	Date of Interview
Interview #1	December 15, 2008
Interview #2	February 15, 2009
Interview #3	April 15, 2009
Interview #4	June 15, 2009

According to Fontana and Frey (2003), interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings. By using a semi-structured interview process, a “negotiated text” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 48) is developed between the respondent and the researcher. Denzin and Lincoln state that interviewing requires openness, emotional engagement, and the development of a potentially long-term, trusting relationship between the interviewer and the subject. Interviewing allows for human-to-human relation with the respondent and the desire to understand rather than to explain (Fontana & Frey, 2003).

By using a semi-structured interview method, Fontana and Frey (2003) indicate there are some basic elements of interviewing that need to be taken into consideration: (a) accessing the setting, (b) understanding the language and culture of the respondents, (c) deciding on how to present oneself, (d) locating an informant, (e) gaining trust, (f) establishing rapport, and (g) collecting empirical materials.

#### Accessing the Setting

Having the qualifications as a doctoral student in Educational Leadership and as a practicing Middle school administrator, the researcher was able to access the setting of the interview. The interviews took place at the middle school in the office of each individual principal.

#### Understanding the Language and Culture of the Respondents

As a practicing middle school principal in the state of Iowa, the researcher was able to understand the language and culture of the respondents.

### Deciding on How to Present Oneself

As a practicing middle school principal and as a doctoral student at the University of Northern Iowa, the researcher was able to build the trust and openness that is required in a phenomenological study.

### Locating an Informant

To locate possible informants to interview the website, “schoolspring.com” was used. This website allowed the researcher to find job postings for middle school administrators positions starting in the fall of the 2008-2009 school year. This site asks for the location (state) of the search, the category (education field) of the search, the grade level of the search, and the job type (employment status) of the search. With this the researcher was able to type in “Iowa” for the location, “Administration” for the category, “Intermediate” for the grade level, and “Full Time” for the job type. From this search 36 possible job postings were located. Taking these job postings, the researcher randomly chose a job opening in a middle school in Eastern, Iowa, an opening in a middle school in Western, Iowa, and an opening in a middle school in Central, Iowa.

### Gaining Trust

By presenting himself in a true sense, both professional and personally, the researcher helped gain trust during the interview.

### Establishing Rapport

Establishing rapport started with the initial presentation and introduction. By having a similar background the researcher was able to not only connect with the

respondents as a practicing middle school principal but also as a mentor who would remain confidential during the interviews.

### Collecting Empirical Materials

A digital audio recorder was used to capture the interview material. This allowed recording of the interview conversation in a non-intrusive manner. In order to capture of non-verbal aspects to the interview such as tone of voice, inflection, and pacing, field notes were immediately taken after each interview. Finally, word-for-word transcription was done to collect all data used for analysis.

## CHAPTER 4

### NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the research data gathered during the ongoing interviews with three first year middle school principals. Once again, these data were collected using interviewing techniques to gain an understanding of the positive and negative experiences that principals encounter as they navigated through their first year of administrative duties at the middle school level. The importance of these narratives is to learn if there are any gaps that are missing in the literature as it relates to the middle school principalship, and the true, authentic lived experienced of a person going through their first year as a middle school principal.

#### Susan's Story

##### August-December: It Can Get Overwhelming

As I drove into the small town of Darius, Iowa, to meet Susan, the new Middle-School principal, for our first face-to-face meeting, it was easy to see that the roots of this small town are agriculturally-based. From the highway, it was clear that combines and tractors had been busy this fall with the harvest out in the corn and soybean fields and, even on this cold December day, the unmistakable odor of a nearby hog confinement hangs in the air. As I drove further into town, the grain elevator and the livestock sale barn were immediately followed by a small dairy farm. However, just beyond the dairy farm, I noticed that commerce seemed to be flourishing with a new industrial park housing a big name manufacturing factory, restaurants, gas stations, and small strip mall.



In fact, unlike many small rural towns in Iowa, Darius boasts that since 1960 the town's population has grown by 176%--to over 3,000 townspeople. With this rise in population and tax dollars, the citizens of Darius built a new high school in 1973 and then, in 2005, invested 1.3 million dollars into a new 5-8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school. Currently, the middle school has a student population of 283 students.

After pulling into the tidy parking lot, I entered the school's main office to begin my interview process. However, since I was a little early, I sat down in a chair to wait for my appointment and noticed that the lobby of the school, like the parking lot, was very clean and organized. On the walls three framed pictures hung highlighting the attributes of focus, aspiration, and endurance. After a few minutes, the school's secretary came back to her desk from a filing room. Seeing me she gave a pleasant greeting and, after finding out who I was, escorted me into the principal's inner office to wait for Susan, who had just begun her job as the principal at Darius Middle School (DSM) that previous August. While I waited there, I noticed that on the wall another framed picture hung that continued the theme of personal character attributes. This one read, "Teamwork" and had a picture of a wave crashing down in the ocean. Under the picture a caption stated, "Individually I am one drop, together we are an ocean." On her desk Susan had a computer, two cups of coffee, one bottle of water, a newspaper, pictures of her family, and a very full inbox filing system that was filled with papers and letters. After a few minutes, Susan opened the door with a welcoming smile.

From the beginning Susan was very professional, but comfortable, both in her physical appearance and communication. Her blond hair looked newly styled as it hung

around her shoulders. Looking me in the eye she smiled, firmly shook my hand, and welcomed me to DMS. As we sat down in gray conference chairs around a small circular table, Susan confidently introduced herself to me and we began our conversation.

Susan was 41 years old, and married to a livestock farmer. The two of them have three kids: a 4<sup>th</sup> grader and twins in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Prior to her first principalship, Susan taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade Reading and Language Arts for 17 years in Minnesota. While she taught, she was also the head varsity track coach and assistant varsity volleyball coach.

In 1999, Susan earned a master's degree in Elementary Education with a Middle School endorsement. Over the next few years Susan had a number of leadership opportunities within her school district that she took great pride in as a teacher leader. These included being a member on the Professional Development Committee, leading the implementation of the school's Curriculum Mapping initiative, and bringing an Advisor-Advisee program to the middle school. However, in regards to leadership at the principal level, Susan noted, "When you think principal you think disciplinary kinds of situations. I was never really involved in a whole lot of that." Nevertheless, from these experiences, Susan made the decision to pursue a second Master's Degree in Educational Leadership.

Susan explained that she enjoyed and valued her Educational Leadership program, but it also included classes she would have preferred not to take. She reflected,

There were certain classes that I was real disappointed having to sit through. I had an evaluation class, which was excellent...I guess...I wish there would have been a little bit more in terms of law. We had a class called "The Principalship" and that would have been a really good class had there been more analyzing of case studies.

Overall, she felt she had an average educational experience during her Educational Leadership program, but she explained that wished she had gained a stronger understanding of Special Education law to help her as she worked frequently with discipline situations in her new role. In addition, though she read quite a bit on educational research during her free time as a graduate student, she would have preferred her course work had emphasized such researchers as Robert Marzano and Richard Stiggins. According to Susan, “We were never presented with any of those researchers through any of the program, and I thought that was odd.” For many of her classes, Susan wished instructors had used more case study analysis as a teaching method. When questioned whether she had any coursework specifically devoted to the middle level principalship during her program of study, Susan simply stated,

Nope. That’s why, had I not had 17 years in a middle school, I guess...I don’t know...there was nothing in the program that took each chunk and said an effective elementary principal acts this way or does this, an effective middle school principal does this, or an effective high school principal does this. We never had any of that. It was all lumped together.

Upon completion of her degree in Educational Leadership in May, 2008, Susan began to look at the local posting of jobs on-line and in the newspaper. When she would find an intriguing possibility Susan would ask her husband, “Okay, well, do I or don’t I?” Finally, when the job was posted for DMS, Susan got excited because her husband had a number of agricultural contacts there, he had sold cattle at the sale barn, and some of her husband’s hog facilities were financed with a credit company in the town. Due to this close connection with the community, Susan discussed the posting with her husband. He responded, “Well, yeah! Of course! Go for this one!” From this encouragement, Susan

stated, “I worked real hard at making sure my I’s were dotted and my T’s were crossed in hoping I’d get an interview.”

Susan did get an interview and, shortly after, received an invitation to become the new principal at DMS for the 2008-2009 school year. Susan felt excited because her new school district was so similar to the one that she had been working at for 17 years in terms of programs, initiatives, systems, and operations. Susan recalled, “It was just a lot of those little things that just made it really exciting that I thought this isn’t something I’m going to have to learn all over again.” With this new job in front of her, Susan and her family decided that they would keep their farm so her husband could maintain his own livelihood, but live in the town of Darius (a little over an hour away from the farm). For Susan, having grown up on cattle farms and having married a farmer, moving into town was a life-changing decision—one that she made with her family so she could just be a short distance from school.

Before her first days as the new principal, Susan felt a strong sense of confidence in her abilities to fulfill her duties and responsibilities. Because of her experience as a middle school teacher, Susan felt prepared for what the position would entail. Susan had spent considerable time observing her former principal during her time as a teacher and felt confident this would help her as she started into her own principalship. However, even with this confidence, Susan was a little nervous about working with a wider range of students than she had previously done as a 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. Susan joked,

I was nervous about 8<sup>th</sup> graders. In my opinion, prior to coming, I thought there should be a planet for 14 year olds. And when they get 15 they can come back to earth! So, I was really nervous because I felt like, as a 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, I could handle 5<sup>th</sup> graders and I could handle 7<sup>th</sup> graders, but 8<sup>th</sup> graders, I was really,

really nervous about how that was going to be...I was nervous about how that discipline was going to go with them.

During the first quarter of the school year, Susan spent a great deal of time managing the daily operations of the school. As the middle school principal, Susan's typical day began at 7:15 a.m. Then, for the first hour before school, Susan checked her email, found out if any teachers were going to be gone for the day, and made an effort to talk with students out in the commons area and hallways of the school before school started at 8:15 a.m. Once school officially began, Susan spent the rest of the morning responding to emails, dealing with situations that came up, and preparing for or attending meetings. Susan commented, "It's been like one meeting after--I mean, the meetings never stop!"

After lunch Susan said she typically concentrated on touching base with her guidance counselor who helped her get acquainted with the principalship and school district, handling the occasional discipline problems that came up and making herself visible by being in the hallways or doing classroom "walkthroughs." However, with all the managerial tasks Susan faced as a new principal during the first semester, it was difficult getting into the classrooms on a consistent basis.

By the end of September, Susan noticed she had a good handle on most of the day-to-day management functions of the school; nevertheless, she started to notice many other challenges that began to impact her personal life. Once the school day finished at 3:18 p.m., if there were not supervision duties related to extracurricular activities, Susan stayed until 5:30-6:00 p.m. This was different than her life as a teacher when she was able to leave school earlier and meet her kids at home as they got off the bus. However,

now as the principal, Susan's new schedule did not allow her to be at home with her kids.

This was tough at times. Susan commented,

I am just thankful that my husband is able to help because of the time constraint or the time commitment, but now the kids can get off the bus at home and they, having lived on a farm with dad out in the barn, they're used to being in a house by themselves and I know they can handle themselves okay, so they'll get off the bus and that they're fine.

At night Susan went home and worked hard to spend a good two hours with her kids until she helped put them to bed at 8:30. After that, while she would have liked to spend time with her husband watching some ball games on TV, Susan had to instead get out her computer and start working on her staff bulletin, look at data, or prepare reports and graphs for upcoming meetings. Further, after getting into bed, Susan also spent time reading leadership magazines at night before going to bed around 10:30 p.m. When asked what she thought of this daily schedule, Susan explained,

I understand in these first couple of years it's going to be very much like being a first year teacher and basically my life is just going to revolve around this. So I have told the kids to just be patient that this is mom's first year and things will get better.

Being new to the school district was challenging for Susan. After working in her previous school district for many years, Susan had a strong understanding of all the "ins and outs" of the system there. However, being in a new school district Susan noted,

When you've been in a situation for 17 years and you know every family and every kid, and you know all the politics that go on in the school, and you know where the paperclips are, you know everything. To come into, not just a new school, but a new state on top of it, it's been overwhelming.

Another area of challenge for Susan was learning how to stay organized as a principal. Because principals are responsible for so many things in the school finding an

organizational system is crucial. Reflecting on areas that she wished her Educational Leadership program would have addressed that would have been beneficial to her as the new principal, Susan sighed,

I wish I would have had an opportunity to see a well-organized office. What it looks like and what kinds of things do you need to keep and how should you keep them and that kind of thing because it can get overwhelming.

Despite her frustrations, she said she had a number of successes over the first nine weeks, most dramatically with how the school presented the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) to its students. When Susan first arrived at DMS she questioned the number of tests the students were taking during their ITBS testing that were not required for “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) reporting. By comparing the different types of tests that the students at DMS were taking to the different tests the students in her former school were taking, Susan noticed a big difference. It became a goal of Susan’s to reduce the number of tests the students at DMS took during the testing period and get the school off the “watch list” in three sub group categories: English as a Second Language (ESL), Special Education, and Socio-Economic Status. Susan stated, “Of course being a first year principal I want us off there. I don’t want that hanging over our heads!”

In addition, at this same time, under Susan’s leadership, a team of teachers received professional development training involving physical education and fun community-building activities at the “SuperPower Summit” in Des Moines, IA. Utilizing this in-service training, Susan described how the week of ITBS testing the whole school got involved in silly morning calisthenics. Susan explained,

It was awesome. The kids loved it. The gym was full...282 kids in there. One day it was the Macarena. Another day it was the Hokey-Pokey. I mean it was a

forty-five record and it was hilarious. The girls that were helping us get organized in the morning were like, "Is that an oversized CD?" They had no idea. Oh my gosh, we laughed! Anyway, we did all those things thinking whatever we can do to try and improve the scores.

Finally, Susan also instituted an incentive program for students. With the help of her community, Susan arranged a number of extra curricular opportunities for students who showed improvement in their ITBS scores. For example, if students improved they could take part in attending a movie at the local movie theater or a swimming party at the local indoor swimming pool. In the end, the students did improve on their test scores. Susan enthusiastically said, "We got the scores back and they were unbelievable!"

Nevertheless, there were some set backs along the way. Susan struggled with being the "Newbie" in the district. Many times throughout the first part of the year Susan had to hold back on her true opinions and thoughts with her faculty. Susan explained,

You don't want to rock the boat this first year. You don't want to say, "By God, we're going to do this because I've been through this and this is the way it should be." But on the other hand you have to remember you are the boss as well and so it's trying to find balance in the middle ground.

Susan struggled with the same feeling with her superiors,

I feel like this first year I've kind of got to go with the flow a little bit in order to see what the environment and the climate is around here. And what everybody expects. And how harsh discipline should be...so that part of being the "Newbie" has been...aw...it's frustrating.

Adjusting to new demands on her time presented another challenge. As a new principal, scores of different meetings demanded her attendance. Because there were so many Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings and administrative meetings Susan felt like she was out of the building and gone all the time. Because she was out of the building so often, there seemed to be a domino effect for Susan. For example, she was at



a meeting instead of working on creating a report for the school board. Then, in order to finish the report, she had to take this home and work on it at night, instead of spending time with her family. In addition, because she was out of the building so often, Susan found it difficult to really connect with her teachers and students in a way that would allow her to build strong meaningful relationships. This aspect of the job was much different than what she experienced as a teacher.

As our first interview came to its conclusion on that cold December day, I asked Susan to describe her life as a middle school principal at this stage in the year. Susan responded,

Time consuming comes to mind. I can see why females are not in this position...It's just because there are so many nights where I am here for a meeting or I've got paperwork that I need to do and many times I'll get the kids to bed and then I'll come back here until 9:30-10:00 p.m. It's...mom's...you know...being a mom, it's a little different than being a dad. In a way...that part of it...the time that's involved, and maybe because it's the first year, I don't know...I think it can be hectic at times.

Her words rang true to me. The lessons from the last seven years I have been learning in my own life about trying to find the difficult balance of the duties and tasks of the principalship with the responsibilities and needs at home were lessons Susan was struggling with as well. She was obviously very passionate about her new job as the DSM principal, but it was also apparent that she felt torn between school and family. However, despite these struggles, she seemed to be embracing her new role with a very positive attitude. She concluded by saying of her job as a principal, "Maybe...because I'm a person that likes a challenge, it's exciting."

### February: Getting into a Groove

When I returned in February for our second interview, Susan seemed to be feeling more confident with her daily life as a principal. Even though she admitted that there was still more to learn, she said she was “getting into a groove” with the principalship. As I looked around her office space, I noticed less clutter on it. However, as I looked up at the top of her filing cabinets I saw a stack of ITBS files on one cabinet and a strange black and white striped hat on the other one. In addition, instead of just having one desktop computer on her desk, there was now an extra desktop computer on a small table behind her desk and a laptop in a computer bag on the floor.

As we sat down at her desk, I asked about her confidence. Susan indicated that much of her confidence came from improvements in students’ ITBS scores, at least some of which she attributed to changes she had implemented in the fall. With Susan’s leadership, the school revised the schedule of testing dates, reduced the number of tests the students would take, encouraged more community building activities throughout the testing week, and arranged for an incentive program for individual improvement.

Not wanting to slip academically backward in January, Susan and her leadership team, composed of some of her teachers, decided to organize a SMART (Students Math and Reading Time) program for her students. This program offered students more challenges by dividing students into small groups based upon their ITBS scores. Then the students would meet once a week during the school day to be challenged at their own level with reading or math instruction. With the work of her leadership team and the

obvious “buy-in” from the teachers who were willing to give up their class time for their students to participate in the program, Susan believed this new plan had been a success.

However, the successful ITBS results proved to be a double-edged sword for Susan. She explained that the multiple computers I had seen in her office stemmed from all sorts of technology problems. In the end, she needed three different computers in order to read and respond to emails and to develop the documents she wanted to create to process and share the ITBS scores. The technology problems meant she spent even more time working at night, after her children had gone to bed. Late evenings found her working on weekly bulletins to her staff, but staying up later spending time analyzing student achievement data more in-depth than ever before.

This district does a lot with data...I spend many nights looking at ITBS scores and just trying to understand and graphing. I had to prepare a mid-year board report and so the graphs...just getting accustomed to dealing with creating excel graphs and how to do that. You know when you sit down to a computer you can chew off two hours in a heart beat just messing around with that stuff.

Along with working to improve students’ academic performances, she also worked on the social-emotional side of her middle school students. According to Susan, the most important characteristics of a middle school are “cooperation and teaming.” Susan explained, “Middle school is all about relationships. Content academics really is second. I mean middle schoolers so desire wanting to interact and have conversations and moreso than a high school situation.”

With this mentality and perspective, at the start of February, Susan found herself working with two 8th grade girls who started talking about clothing. The girls mentioned

they liked a new style of clothing called “Zebra clothes.” Susan said, “Well, I’ve got a zebra jacket and zebra shoes, we should wear them together one day!”

Susan and the girls made good on their idea and she said it was a great success in strengthening their relationship. In fact, Susan’s example caught on with her staff. While out shopping the following weekend, one of Susan’s teachers bought her a zebra hat to wear with her outfit one day to school. Susan now keeps this hat in her office as a showpiece and a reminder. Perhaps, looking at the lines on the zebra hat in her office crowded with three different computers for graphing ITBS scores is a great illustration that sometimes the lines on a graph might not be as important as keeping the lines of communication open with her students—even if that means wearing a silly striped hat.

Despite the great successes of the new year, Susan also faced some new challenges. The excessive demands of countless meetings, conferences, and professional development had not lessened. Susan struggled to get into the classrooms at her school. It became Susan’s “New Year’s Resolution” to observe classrooms more often.

Her plan was to devote an hour each morning to walkthrough evaluations; however, after the first month of second semester, Susan was still working on the consistency of this plan. Due to the time constraints of the position, Susan admitted with laughter that, “It’s likely that it will be my resolution again next year!” Although she joked about these informal evaluations, Susan started feeling the pressure of completing the required formal evaluations of her staff members. All evaluations were due by March 30<sup>th</sup>. Susan explained, “I have quite a number of evaluations this year so each week there’s usually a point where I am in a classroom doing a formal evaluation for 45-50

minutes.” However, because of her extensive experience and background in middle school education, and the fact that she did not force change right away, Susan believed that she earned a higher level of credibility with her staff as they responded positively to her during these yearly evaluations. Susan noted,

When I do suggest things I think they take it with a real appreciation...I can tell that they're thinking I do know what I'm talking about versus oh yeah, maybe I'll try that, maybe I won't.

Another challenge for Susan was her realization that the principal's job never stops, and she must constantly be aware of the expectations of parents and other school community members. Throughout the course of the school year, Susan and her family had been working hard to make new friendships in the community. Finally, in late January they were invited to a Super Bowl party. The family jumped at the chance.

At this party, neighbors and new friends gathered together. During this time all of the parents stayed up stairs and all the kids were in the basement having fun and socializing. Susan enjoyed the chance to socialize with other adults and drank a beer as she watched the game.

However, the next day one of the school board members approached the superintendent to express her concern that the new principal was drinking at a party where kids were present. The superintendent called Susan to his office and spoke as a mentor about her role and visibility within the community. After this event, Susan and her family changed the way they socialized in Darius. Susan explained, “If I want a bottle of wine I don't go to Wal-Mart anymore, my husband does that instead.”

Considering the many different challenges, I asked if there was anything that the University's Educational Leadership program could have done differently to prepare her for the middle school principalship. Susan cupped her hands to her mouth and exclaimed,

Data! I mean what kinds of data. These standardized tests, specifically in the case of ITBS...I think having provided us, even in Minnesota, with what's important in an ITBS test, what scores do you look at? What do these scores mean? That kind of thing. I wish there would have been a class specific to just data. What's important? What do you look for? What does it mean? How do you chart it? How to explain it to people in normal people terms. That would have been huge!

When asked for more specific details related to her preparation for the *middle school* principalship, Susan felt that it was her experience as a middle school *teacher* that had prepared her to be an effective middle school *principal*. However, after reflecting on a question about whether-or-not she felt like she would have been prepared had she not had these educational experiences, Susan stated,

I've thought about that and cannot imagine. I can't imagine how somebody would, the difficulties or stresses or the...I just think it would be so much different for somebody that didn't have as much prior experience with this level. I mean...not to mention all the little things and intricacies that you have to learn about just with the position, but then a new district that you belong to, but then throw in the complexities of a middle school kid...how does anybody do it that doesn't really truly understand how a middle school functions or how middle school kids are?

As she continued to reflect on the year so far, Susan noted that she was "very much enjoying the job." When asked why this was so Susan responded,

It was definitely the right move for me. I needed a different challenge. I went to school my last four years of teaching, I could practically do it in my sleep...I knew the system. I knew where my staff was at. I knew everything was just so easy, so I was ready for a challenge.

Nevertheless, Susan was realistic about the job yet to do. In her words,

I really feel, as a first year administrator, you are really in a survival mode the whole first year, just surviving what new things pop up, the programs that are in place, the different things that just comprise the school day. It's and so next year I look forward to really having my feet grounded with all of that and I can start being more poignant with changes I would like to see.

As our second interview came to its conclusion, I asked Susan to describe for me, at the end of February, her life as a middle school principal. Susan stated with a smile,

Organized. I feel a bit more organized than I was before. I am feeling more calm, like I've got a better handle on personalities, things that are going on, communicating my unhappiness with something, or my appreciativeness for something else. I am feeling more confident about those situations...so calm, confident, and organized...However, I don't think there is anyway to prepare anybody for this...you almost have to jump in feet first and just do the job.

#### April: I'm Really in a Happy Place

In April, I returned for our next interview. As I entered Susan's office the first thing I noticed was a lack of clutter. As had been the case in February, her desk looked pretty clean and there were more labeled binders on the bookshelves in her office than ever before. When I asked about these changes, Susan smiled and mentioned a number of things that helped to create a positive change in her life as a middle school principal.

One of the first changes Susan described was a decrease in the number of meetings she had to attend. Since she had now been working within the district for a number of months, the superintendent made the decision that Susan did not have to attend the additional administrative team meetings designed to transition her into the school district. In addition, a break in special education meetings developed as the support services teachers gathered information for the end of the year IEP updates. Finally, most of the professional development training meetings had been completed. Now that she was in the building more often, Susan concentrated on the organizational aspects to the

principalship and had the time to better handle “the mountain of paperwork, and the kinds of organization that needs to be done, and the time management component.”

Another change that directly improved from having more time in the building involved Susan’s ability to get a handle on some of the discipline problems that were effecting the day-to-day operations of the school. As spring arrived, she began to see an increase in the student tardiness and referrals of problematic students to her office. Fewer meetings and a few months more administrative experience made her better able to tackle these head on. According to Susan,

I guess once the fourth quarter got off and I started really getting on the whole tardy situation and that was, and I apologized to the staff because I said that was one thing that I knew as a principal I needed to keep on top of the attendance thing, but with so many other things I was trying to get accustomed to it never started until the third quarter.

Because of this increase in the time she had at school, Susan noted that she was “not feeling so pressured and rushed. I just feel like my days are managed a lot better than they were.”

Finally, Susan continued to strive to find ways to get her entire middle school cooperating and working together. To accomplish this, she had helped to organize a “March Madness” basketball tournament at school. During this time teachers and students took an afternoon off from the regular routine and the kids played basketball against each other. In the end, the winning student team got to play against a faculty team for the championship. Susan enthusiastically explained, “It was awesome! It was so much fun!”



By taking time to allow for relationships to develop between students and teachers, Susan was helping her school create a conducive environment for learning. If students know their teachers care about them, they are more likely to work harder in their classes and display positive behaviors on a regular basis. From events like this, Susan reflected on the year and stated,

I think the relationships I am forming with them [the students and faculty] that was hard for me coming in, cause I had relationships and to start off basically at ground zero. I think that was frustrating for me because I enjoy middle school kids so much and I wasn't able, that wasn't there yet, and I feel like now it is.

From these situations in school, Susan explained, "I feel like I have finally settled into things." By "settling in," Susan meant meeting the expectations of teachers and students alike. She said, "Everybody's kind of found a groove and they know how I operate and what my expectations are." Looking back on the previous seven months, Susan reflected, "I'm really in a happy place right now."

With feelings of success in the building and her ability to get more accomplished at school because of the improvement in time management, Susan noticed a number of changes at home, too. She now stayed home for about 15 minutes later each morning to enjoy eating breakfast with her children, something that she could not often do previously. It was a great chance for her to connect with her kids before the rush of the day and she was still able to arrive at school by 7:30 a.m. or so. In addition, after school, Susan just went home at night and focused on her husband and kids instead of being on the computer so much. It was a great relief that she and her family had time to do yard work, prepare for a garage sale, and just settle into the spring. Susan declared, "I am really trying to leave more of my work here so I have more time with my family and have

more time to handle the needs that are at home.” Together this helped create more balance and feelings of comfort in her life.

Another area that helped her feel better about her home life was that her kids were beginning to find their place in the Darius community by making friends. Susan described how hard it had been for her kids to leave the farm where they were used to a lot of freedom and had a group of friends that they had known for years. They had lost much of this with the move to Darius and she felt they really struggled at first. However, Susan seemed relieved to explain that after living in Darius for several months, her kids were now “enjoying the neighborhood kids and really have established some friends.” The fact that her kids were happier made life at school better for Susan, too, because she was able to feel more comfortable with the balance she was creating.

With the month of June fast approaching, Susan started preparing for the next school year. She continuing to organize and plan for the professional development of her teachers next year. Because she had such a strong history and background with Curriculum Mapping, Susan was put in charge of this initiative for her district during the 2009-2010 school year. Also, Susan was looking into improving the reading ability of her students by possibly giving her Language Arts teachers Storyworks magazines to integrate into their curriculum.

In addition to professional development, Susan worked on the schedule of classes for next year. After a year of “Blocked Scheduling,” Susan would like to see a change happen. In her opinion there had been a number of difficult situations that occurred because of the blocked scheduling. This had an impact on the flexibility needed to allow

for different opportunities and natural obligations that came up throughout the school year.

On top of these responsibilities, Susan was also required to conduct interviews to hire new staff members. This was all new territory for her as a professional. She had no prior experience in this area as a teacher. She said her Educational Leadership program never addressed this, which caused her a lot of frustration. As she worked through this process for the first time, she focused on trying to “pick up on when principals write recommendations or superintendents that are really gaga about someone and the ones that are just trying to sort of give this person something and that aren’t real excited about them being in education.” Susan felt lucky when the high school principal, a veteran administrator, gave her a set of 80 interview questions to look through prior to the interview process. Because of this gesture, Susan felt a little more confident and developed an interview process through which she successfully hired her first new teacher.

As Susan looked towards the last weeks of school, she was finding herself spending time making sure the teachers were doing a good job of organizing fieldtrips and getting transportation lined up. Susan felt that it was her “responsibility to double check and make sure they have dotted their Is and crossed their Ts.” Although she gained efficiency and confidence in this area, she was still not perfect. Susan told a story about almost missing the deadline to put out-of-state field trips on the March school board meeting agenda. No one told her of this rule for out-of-state field trips until it was about too late. She was able to get all the documentation turned in on time so the

students could go on the trip, but Susan noted, “it probably would have come back on me having been my responsibility in charge of the building and they wouldn’t have been able to go because it wouldn’t have been approved in time.”

In an attempt to continue building community and a positive climate among staff members, Susan was working with her secretary to set up an end-of-the-year social gathering. She hoped to start a tradition of having a nice dinner “outside the walls” of the school.

With all these end of the year responsibilities, Susan continued to reflect on all of her responsibilities as principal and how the demanding schedule had impacted her daily experience. Susan described:

There has been a few days where I haven’t had a chance to have lunch. That part has been...sometimes I go, “you know when I was a teacher I used to get a half an hour to eat and I could sit down and digest and EAT food.” Now, depending on the day and how fast-paced the day has been when I just kind of go, “sometimes it would be nice to go off in a corner and just eat my lunch.”

As our third interview came to its conclusion, I asked Susan to use one or two words to describe her life as a middle school principal at this time. Susan said, “I think excited would be one to use. I feel more excited about coming to work everyday.” For the second word Susan explained, “I think, at this part of the year, everybody can say tired! So, I guess my life as a middle school principal is exciting and happy, but tiring.”

#### June: I Made it Though in One Piece

Upon arriving for our fourth interview, DMS had been out for summer vacation for about two weeks. Even though the school was deserted except for a secretary, Susan was still dressed professionally in a comfortable blue blouse and light khaki pants for our

meeting. However, in contrast to my previous two visits, her office was a bit disheveled. When I asked her about this, Susan informed me that she was making plans to have her office repainted in the next couple of weeks before she left for her summer vacation. When I asked her about the end of the year, Susan laughed. "I am much better now that the building is empty of kids and teachers! I can breathe and not have to haul so much stuff home at night." However, she did note that the last month of school was extremely busy.

During the last month of school Susan found herself doing much more management of the school than in previous months. She continued to oversee field trips requests, to ensure there was coverage for all classes, and to work with her lunch staff so the kitchen area could be shut down efficiently for the summer. She added that these were just a few of those items that fell into the category of "all those little managerial kinds of things" that need to take place at the end of the school year. Despite the successes of the year, I heard experiences of survival, which reminded me of our conversations early in the year. During these final hectic days of the school year, Susan went home each night thinking, "Yes! I got through the day!" without any major problems. She would then leave each morning telling her husband, "Okay, there's only four and a half days left, cross your fingers!" Unfortunately, she explained that her husband crossing his fingers did not help to make sure the year closed up smoothly.

Despite her best efforts on the second to last day of the school year, a very violent fight broke out between two students. This disruption put a damper on the end of the

year because Susan had to suspend the students involved for the remainder of the year and was disappointed to have something like this happen just before the summer break.

Despite this setback, Susan worked hard to end the year on a positive note. For her students, Susan hosted a “Last Day Student Awards” ceremony in the school gymnasium. This production had a video, pictures on “PowerPoint,” music, and as a finale Susan led everyone, students and teachers, in the “happy dance.” Susan described how all the students and teachers mimicked her as she moved her arms in the air, turned her body around, and waved goodbye for the summer. Following the assembly and the students leaving, in another attempt to build positive relationships at her school, Susan hosted a luncheon in the commons area for her teachers during which they celebrated the year and honored two staff members who were retiring. According to Susan, “Many were appreciative. They had never done anything like that and thought that was very fun.”

Building on the success of the end of the year celebration, Susan received the results of a survey she sent out to her teaching staff for them to evaluate her as a principal. The survey contained different categories related to managerial ability, personality, and communication skills. Susan thought most of the responses would indicate a general average response; however, when she went through the results the majority of the scores were on the upper to high end of the scale. Susan stated with a lot of excitement, “I didn’t expect that!” The area that most encouraged Susan was that her staff believed she was “very student-centered.”

Although Susan celebrated many successes with her students and staff throughout the school year, her hours of work and dedication to the school had still taken a toll on her personally. Knowing that her personal health and wellness had been important to her as a teacher and coach, I asked her to reflect on these aspects of her life at the conclusion of her first year as principal. Despite all the success she had experienced throughout the year professionally, Susan responded negatively by saying,

I have gained five to seven pounds this year, and I've been trying to decide why? I work out diligently three to four times a week, running and weights, and this was a great stress reliever at 5:30 in the morning. But it wasn't able to keep it (weight) off. I chalk it up to the sitting in meetings, in my office, during parent visits. I just don't think that a principal has the ability to be as mobile as a teacher. I go from sitting in my office to sitting in a classroom observing teachers. I didn't have any other health issues. I am sure my blood pressure was out of this world a couple of times!

During the remainder of the month of June, Susan kept busy with many tasks and responsibilities that were simply put off until time was available. Susan took this time to enter discipline notes into the school's student management computer system that she "neglected to keep up with" during the regular school year, meeting regularly with her guidance counselor to talk about the schedule, writing a credit approval letter for her teachers that took professional development at the school, trying to organize new information for the school's website, attending different administrative meetings, working on professional development plans for next year, and then of course, making plans to paint her office during the summer. With only a few weeks left in her first year of the middle school principalship, Susan joked, "I will be here and then after that, come June 25<sup>th</sup>, I am not coming back until August, I am going to stay away!"

When asked what words she would use to describe her life as an administrator at the end of her first year of the middle school principalship, Susan responded, “Relieved! I made it through in one piece! I don’t know, I am excited about the next year already! I just feel like I am really in the groove. Feeling like this is my building now.”

As she reflected on how prepared she had felt for this first year as a middle school principal, Susan contemplated for a moment about what an Educational Leadership program should focus on to help pre-service administrators prepare for the middle level principalship. Then, she explained that she believed there should be a clear focus on the “developmental skills of an 11-14 year old. This would be some kind of class on the emotional and the physical changes that these kids go through and how important forming relationships are.” In addition, Susan thought an emphasis should be placed on the fact that “understanding data for an entire school is way different than understanding data for an individual grade level.”

In the end, Susan felt she had learned some valuable lessons to share with incoming first-year middle school administrators. In regards to the responsibilities of the principal, she pointed out that it was very important to “figure out who your resources are and utilize them...figure out who your top resources are and really make sure to establish a relationship with them.” On a more personal note, Susan explained, “It’s been really difficult to try and leave certain situations at school and not take them home with me—make sure you have time for your family!” Finally, Susan excitedly closed by giving a final piece of advice to pre-service administrators planning to become middle school principals by exclaiming with a knowing grin, “Get lots of sleep before you start!”



## Marty's Story

### August-December: I Was Blindsided

In the past 10 years, the small town of Concord has blossomed into a popular bedroom community for a nearby metropolitan city in eastern Iowa. As I drove down the smooth highway into Concord, this was evident in the diverse make up of housing in the neighborhoods. In the older section of town situated around Main Street, rows of small single-story houses with tidy lawns lined the streets. However, in the newer housing developments located on the edge of town, huge multi-storied homes towered above pristinely manicured lawns with professional landscaping. Many of the over 2,000 citizens of Concord moved to town to enjoy the benefits that small town life has to offer and to take advantage of the significantly lower property taxes than those in the nearby city.

With the increase in population came more revenue for the town. Over the past three years, the town of Concord has used this increase in revenue to build a new high school and renovate the old high school to house a 5-8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school. In 2008, Concord Middle School (CMS) enrolled 225 students. It was here that I had my first interview with Marty, the new principal at CMS.

Walking into CMS, I followed directions to the principal's office. When I arrived at the office the school's secretary greeted me cheerfully. The office consists of a large area with a number of filing cabinets, a few chairs and small square table, and a desk for the secretary. Framed posters highlighting the positive character attributes of hope, success, teamwork, leadership, and courage hang on all sides of the waiting area. At the

south end of this main area were two smaller inner offices. One of these was Marty's personal office and the other was a conference room. As I waited to meet Marty for the first time, I peered into her office. Along with the standard desk, computer, and in-box filled with papers, I saw all sorts of mementoes celebrating one of the main universities in the state of Iowa. There were banners, cups, footballs, pictures, and posters everywhere. It was easy to see that Marty was a loyal fan.

With this first impression, I sat back and continued to wait for Marty. After a few minutes Marty came into the office and greeted me with a wide smile and a firm handshake. Marty was dressed neatly in a pink blouse with gray pants. She is about six feet tall, thin, and had long blond hair, which she wore up in a clip. After this initial greeting, Marty escorted me into the conference room next to her office. Compared to her overstuffed office, this room was virtually bare with only two filing cabinets against the wall and a circular table with chairs in the middle of the room. It was a stark difference to Marty's office right next door. After finding our chairs around the table, we began our conversation.

Marty was 35 years old, single, and has no children. She graduated from college with a Bachelor's Degree in Recreation Therapy. With this degree, Marty began her professional career working in the mental health field with adolescents. Following this position, Marty worked as a federal grant administrator for two school districts focusing on needy adolescents. It was during this time that her "interest and passion for education really developed," and she returned to college to complete a second Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education and a Master's Degree in Literacy. After graduation, Marty

started teaching Primary Reading at the elementary school level. While she was completing her first year of teaching, Marty immediately decided to enter a doctoral program for Educational Leadership in order to gain more education and training in leadership.

As she reflected on the coursework included in the educational leadership program, Marty does not believe it prepared her for the role of the principal and did nothing to address middle school administration specifically. Marty explained, “It gave very few authentic experiences. There was a lot of theory and a lot of paper work, and a lot of hoop jumping that didn’t shoot me in the right direction.”

In addition, Marty described the 400 hours of internship required by the program as “a very naive perspective about how administration is.” For example, it was not until she became a head principal that Marty realized the amount of counseling skills she needed in her position, especially at the middle school level. Marty indicated that students would come to her office to talk about the many difficulties they were having with their “home-life, friends, or whatever.” According to Marty, because of the incredible social/emotional developmental change that is happening for these students, she has to deal with what she called “Girl Drama.” Marty explained, “Girl Drama at the middle level is unbelievable. I don’t have the skills to help them work through what they need to work through.”

However, after reflecting upon her Educational Leadership program, Marty concluded, “I think this has to be representative probably of most administrative ‘prep’

programs; until you are doing the job, you can't possibly know what to expect; until you are in that role nothing can prepare you for it."

When reflecting about areas her Educational Leadership program could have addressed more fully in order to prepare her for the principalship, Marty wished her Educational Leadership program would have discussed the "shock that you will experience when working with adults." In Marty's opinion, principal preparation programs need to acknowledge that times have changed and students are faced with more challenges than in times past. For example, Marty emphasized,

The things kids get in trouble for are much more significant than what you might imagine. Things like running away, drugs, bullying and harassment...I mean if I didn't have the opportunity to work with one of the best people [her superintendent] in the state about that I wouldn't have a clue.

In reflecting on her path to becoming a middle school principal, Marty recalled how during the second year of her three-year Educational Leadership program, one of Marty's classmates was hired as the new high school principal for the Concord School District (CSD). Shortly after his hiring, this classmate informed Marty of a job opening in the CSD. This position would be classified as a teaching contract with an administrative title. With her classmate's encouragement, Marty applied and was hired as a 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading teacher and the Dean of Students of CMS. Marty recalled,

I was reluctant because I didn't necessarily feel like I was ready, but he encouraged me to apply so I applied and ended up the day of the interview having this job. And so very quickly, my shift went from reading at the primary level to administration at the middle school level. I started the summer with one focus and ended the summer with another, and so that's how it came to be, just by chance. It wasn't something I was looking for yet.

When asked if she felt prepared for the day-to-day job of being a principal Marty responded, “No, not a clue.” In fact, Marty remembered back to her first days as the principal when she brought all her things into her new office and set everything up, she sat down at her new desk and thought, “How am I going to know what to do? I mean who’s going to tell me? Nobody’s going to tell me. I am just going to have to figure it out myself.”

Within days of being hired, problems developed for Marty. As it turned out, the K-8 principal did not agree with the district’s decision to hire Marty as his assistant. She described how the elementary principal began to “harbor resentment” towards her. These feelings created a very tense, unwelcoming environment, especially when some issues related to gender were brought up. The superintendent immediately realized this was not going to be a productive situation, so he made a switch to have Marty assume most of the administrative duties for the middle school and report directly to him. The other principal would keep the title of K-8 Principal, but in reality he would be devoting his focus to the K-4 elementary school and Marty would focus on the 5-8<sup>th</sup> grades.

Though the arrangement lessened some of the tension between the two, Marty became nervous about what the teachers would say about her lack of experience. Marty reflected,

Although I had a lot of administrative experience elsewhere, in a real variety of experiences that have prepared me for this position, my teaching experience was minimal and I knew that I would have to work very hard to earn the trust and respect of our teachers knowing that they were aware of my lack of teaching experience...that I could prove to them that I could do this job despite not having all those years in the classroom.

Nevertheless, she was excited about moving into her new position because it would give her the opportunity to work with middle school-aged students, a well respected superintendent, fellow principals, and teachers. “I am a real collaborative person,” Marty explained, “so I was really excited about working with adults for the betterment of kids.” In addition, Marty looked forward to working in a smaller school district than the one where she had been teaching. This would allow her “the opportunity to get to know the kids quite a bit.” This perspective, along with her past experiences working with others, helped Marty develop an optimistic picture of the principalship she was about to enter. Marty reflected with a smile,

I assumed I would be walking into a place that would be very welcoming to a new administrator and I had assumed that the climate would be such that the people felt good about being there.

However, Marty quickly realized the reality of the situation and acknowledged feeling misled by the interview committee,

I would say after, within a very short amount of time, like a day or two after being on the job, I recognized the uphill climb I had in terms of our climate and relationships with the teaching staff...I was blindsided.

As she went into more detail about the experience, Marty related further thoughts on the climate of her new school district,

It was not a welcoming environment at all. And it turned out that the climate of our district, specifically in our middle school, had deteriorated to the point that it was almost toxic, very negative, a lot of mistrust, a lot of animosity towards administration...I did not know the environment was as it was when I was hired, so my little rosy picture of things was quickly shattered.

After taking time to get to know the culture and history of the middle school and Concord school district, Marty could understand the feelings her staff seemed to be having for her.

Marty described,

When I arrived at here at Concord Middle School there was a lot of disdain, as a nice way to put it, for administration, and rightfully so. They had gone through 13 administrators in 11 years across the district. I mean just rotating them in and out, almost to the point they were just forcing them out because they were just making life miserable.

Because of these harsh feelings, Marty had a difficult time building relationships with her new staff, and a sense of loneliness developed. It appeared to her that, because her staff had such a poor history with administrators over the years, they were not going to trust her or allow any kind of relationship to develop until she proved to them that she was different. In order to gain their trust and respect, she needed to prove that she was going to stay there, treat them like professionals, and add consistency to their school.

Since those beginning days, Marty spent a lot of time attempting to build positive, professional relationships with her teachers. On a typical day, Marty would go into school early in the morning between 6:00 and 6:30 a.m. to avoid interruptions. Once students and teachers arrived, Marty made a trip around the school to touch base with teachers. This let her know what issues were developing and gave her the chance to talk face-to-face with her faculty members. Marty explained, “I tried to go out of my way to treat them like adults and professionals, something that had been lacking previously.” However, within the first few weeks of school, Marty discovered a problem related to staff relations from previous years—a lack of communication. Marty stated, “They were so left in the dark.” Once she discovered this communication problem, Marty tried to

emphasize communication at every possible opportunity. If there was a reason her faculty and staff needed to know about an issue, Marty immediately communicated with them.

Marty explained her present view, “I seek their opinion versus just mandating it.”

In addition to trying to improve communication between administration and teachers, Marty worked hard the first months of school to create a collaborative, respectful environment. Marty expressed, “I have tried building a little more fun into the day. We have scheduled fun staff activities every month; that’s made a big difference.” Along with looking for more ways to develop positive feelings, Marty made the move to hire a new secretary who she “felt would help to improve morale and be good for kids.”

Besides working on staff relations and school climate issues, Marty also found herself attending a number of meetings. Marty spent a great deal of time working on district initiatives such as the scope and sequence of the curriculum, K-12 learner performance goals, and improving their middle school advisory program. Marty explained,

When I first started here it became very clear through conversations (I met with every single teacher, kind of went through what’s working, what’s not working spiel) and consistently I heard our Seminar, our advisor-advisee program was the pits.

Following the school day, Marty supervised athletic, music, and dramatic activities many nights until 6:30-7:00 p.m. However, Marty noted, “You know what? Nobody ever told me that as a middle school principal I was going to be spending so many nights supervising! That is something I didn’t know, but I learned very quickly!”



Along with experiencing days with more things than she could possibly get to, one of the hardest challenges for Marty to accept was the fact that most of the important decisions impacting the school had already been made for her. Marty illustrated,

First and foremost, when you come into a new role you have to be reactive because everything that's been done has been done. You have had no input, no involvement, and no awareness and so you come in and every decision you make is reactive. That is a very difficult feeling to come to terms with if you're a proactive person.

Another challenge that Marty had to overcome was working with unprofessional adults. Marty described,

The kids don't surprise me. I expect kids to be naughty. I expect, I mean not all kids, but I expect if kids get in trouble that is part of being kids, and we're going to work through that. That is part of my job. I did not expect some of the interactions with teachers to have to take place.

As she worked her way through the first semester, Marty had a number of difficult conversations including speaking to a teacher about dressing inappropriately while at work, and a teacher showing favoritism to certain students in her class. In addition, when the administrative team considered implementing a dress code it hoped would enhance pride in the CSD, teachers threatened legal action at her very first staff meeting. Marty lamented,

You just don't think when you're dealing with adults that you will be dealing with some of the things...A teacher...an associate who leaves to go to funerals all the time...she has more funerals than anybody I have ever met...I mean she is making up funerals...who does that? In my mind I just came in very ill prepared for adults.

Along with challenges with teachers, Marty also encountered challenges with parents. She explained,

Then there are the parents. That is another piece I was absolutely shocked about in terms of a lack of support... There are very few parents who allow their students to take ownership and be accountable for their choices and that is a big shift.

All of these surprises had Marty feeling off balance as a new principal. She had found the principalship to be much different than her work as a teacher. Due to the number of issues related to adults, Marty concluded,

The position requires broad shoulders. It took me a few months, I would say, to come to terms with the fact that I won't have working relationships like I did before as a teacher. Where I was before, I worked very closely with all my teachers that were my friends. You don't have those same kinds of relationships when you're in an administrative role. You learn that coming to school your role has shifted, that social piece is gone. You are strictly there for professional reasons now because unless you're friends with other administrators typically that social element is something you might miss.

Taking all of this into account, I asked Marty to describe her life as a beginning middle school principal in one or two words. Marty responded,

It's kind of like an adventure because everyday I come in thinking I'm going to do something and it never turns out that way. My day is totally different everyday than what I think it is going to be like, and I like that. I am never bored. I am always challenged. I am always on the go. It's a little bit like a mystery. I think I am often puzzled by the reactions of adults, mostly. Kids I get, it's the adults that I'm still puzzled by.

At the end of our interview, I asked Marty how she made it through what seemed like mostly negative experiences in the beginning. She acknowledged that the first three months created such difficulties that she began to question whether or not she should stay in CMS. On a deeper level, she confided that she also wondered whether, as a first year principal, she had what it would take to turn things around. However, Marty laughed as she continued her explanation and said, "I didn't have a choice...I was pretty persistent and determined that I was not going to leave this place worse than I found it." With this

attitude, Marty continued to work hard at developing trust and teacher confidence in her abilities as a leader. Through perseverance, taking things “one day at a time” and sticking to her faith and values, Marty made it through the first semester. She did note though, “I knew that a lot of the innate qualities of what they needed as a leader I possessed. So I had that confidence, but other than that, I have no clue how I made it through!”

### February: Its Just Been a Really Busy Time

In February, I went back to interview Marty for a second time. As I walked into the main office I entered a whirlwind of excitement. Marty and her secretary were running back and forth between stacks of ITBS score sheets. Apparently, as a joke, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student had gotten into a pile of score sheets and had filled in extra bubbles on several students’ answer sheets.

Marty had determined that this happened during one particular testing time, but was now trying to determine how many students would have to take the test over again because of this “prank.” Once things were sorted out, Marty just sighed and shook her head with a smile. I remembered how in the fall she had said, “The kids don’t surprise me. I expect kids to be naughty. I mean not all kids, but I expect if kids get in trouble that is part of being kids, and we’re going to work through that. That is part of my job.” She then escorted me back into the conference room and started our second conversation.

According to Marty, at the start of second semester she began to see and feel a difference in the atmosphere of CMS. During the previous months, she had worked hard to create a building leadership team made up of teachers, counselors, and her. From this work Marty stated,

Having the leadership team as allies was a good move on my part. It was needed by me, I mean I needed those positive leaders in the building, but they needed to know that they could work with an administrator, and I think that kind of filtered through the rest of the staff.

However, following the holidays, things started to get very busy for Marty. For example, in January, Marty implemented a new student-centered approach to the delivery of the annual Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) for her students. With the help of her building leadership team, Marty grouped students with different scholastic and social needs together for the testing sessions. It was her goal to give students with difficulties focusing a room in the building with lower numbers of students and less distractions. To organize this and implement the plan took a lot of time and effort. Also during this time, Marty started conducting her formal evaluations of her teachers, and she continued supervising both the boys and girls basketball games and wrestling matches most nights of the week.

On top of that, in February, CMS was randomly chosen from all the schools in Iowa to take part in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) testing program. This meant that once again, Marty and her teachers had to take time out of their daily schedule to administer more standardized tests. All of these things seemed to stack up, and Marty lamented, "It's just been a really busy time...sometimes I feel like I can't keep up, but I know that's just the nature of the job."

Having had a number of months as the middle school principal, Marty started to experience some positive changes in her role as the principal. Having had limited experience overall with middle school-aged students, Marty began to notice that "At the middle level there are a lot more social issues that take place with kids--bullying and

harassment type issues.” Because of this realization, Marty did a number of things to help educate herself.

First, she better acquainted herself with the developmental needs of middle school-aged students. She did this by talking extensively with the district’s At-Risk Coordinator on ways to improve the Advisory program at CMS, which teachers had initially told her was ineffective at best. Next, she attended professional development trainings focusing on literacy needs at the middle level and began meeting monthly with other middle school principals in the area. Finally, she started to work directly with middle school students on a day-to-day basis. Marty believed that working on building positive relationships with students was the “biggest proactive thing I do.”

To illustrate this, Marty told me a personal story of a time she found herself working with a group of 4<sup>th</sup> grade boys who would be entering middle school the following year. Her goal was to help ease their transition and begin building a positive relationship with them. These boys had a reputation as being troublemakers and class clowns. Many of the boys simply considered themselves to be bad.

When Marty heard this from some of the elementary teachers at a district level meeting, she went to the elementary school and had a meeting with the boys. During this time she told them “everybody has goodness, you just make bad choices.” From this conversation, Marty recalled one little boy finally stating, in a high-pitched squeak of a voice, “I’ve got some goodness!” When this happened, the rest of the boys all agreed and said, “Yeah, we’ve got some goodness.” Because she made the attempt to be proactive

and start building a positive relationship with these boys early on, Marty believed she would have better success with them if discipline situations should arise next year.

Along with being proactive, Marty was also starting to enjoy connecting with students on a daily basis at school. Because she had spent time talking to students in the halls and at extra curricular events, Marty said how being around kids was helping her through some of the difficult aspects of the first semester. Marty described,

I think one of the things that I always feel good about is when I have a student who comes in and says, “Hey, I want to check my grades with you” or “I just want to tell you something that happened that is really awesome.” That is when I know I am in it for the right reasons. It’s just those little student conversations that are positive and unexpected.

Another area of positive change resulted from a relationship set up by Marty’s statewide professional organization, School Administrators of Iowa (SAI). As a new principal, Marty had been placed in the “SAI Principal Mentorship Program” and matched with a veteran female principal in a nearby school district. Marty was pleased with this professional relationship and explained,

Our superintendent here kind of rigged it so I could work with her, which was pretty awesome...I mean she has held so many different types of positions that she just has such a unique perspective, but then having a woman’s perspective is valuable too because she has combated some of the same things that I am dealing with here with that one particular administrator.

Even though she had some success in addressing climate and relationship issues and enjoyed the relationship with her mentor, Marty began to “question just being a principal, in general.” At the end of February, Marty went to the doctor for her annual physical examination. During this check up the doctor had some concerns about some blood work and asked her if she was feeling fatigued. Marty responded casually by

saying, “Well, yeah, I am a middle school principal! I don’t know any middle school principals who aren’t fatigued!” However, after the appointment Marty started to reflect on her own health and wellness since she started the job. Marty, who had been an avid exerciser before she started the principalship, realized that in reality she had gotten considerably less sleep and exercise since August. This caused her to “worry about long-term impacts and stress levels” associated with being the principal. With this health concern, Marty was not sure if she should be complacent with the quality of life being a principal could have on her. Marty stated,

I mean there are days when I think, ‘I am not sure if this is worth it.’ I feel like it detracts so much personally and with my health. I just worry about that. I just can’t foresee myself doing this for 10 years but it will only be because I am ready to move on to the next thing, not because I can’t wait to get away from being a principal.

Because of this immediate concern for her health and wellness, I asked if there was anything that her program could have done differently to prepare her for the middle school principalship? Marty, naturally, talked about a stronger emphasis on health and wellness issues. In addition, she wished her Educational Leadership program had not presented the principalship in such a rosy perspective; and instead, presented more authentic descriptions of the events and interactions that take place in the life of a principal.

As we moved to the end of the interview, I asked Marty to give a few words to explain her life as a middle school principal at this point in the year, Marty sighed,

‘Hectic’...A little bit exhausting. On most days it’s pretty gratifying...there are days that you go home feeling a little bit defeated. Not very many...I am pretty satisfied with my role, and I would say ‘tiring.’

### April: Trying to Keep Up with the Daily Grind

Towards the end of April, I drove out to Concord to interview Marty for the third time. Although there were no major incidents, like the test prank, when I walked into the office this time, Marty looked a bit tired and harried. This made me think back to her health concerns during my last visit. As we sat down in the bare conference room again, Marty began, without prompting, telling me just how busy she was at this time. Marty explained that she was organizing for the upcoming Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) testing period, finishing up with her teacher evaluations, and attending meetings--all while trying to “keep up with the daily grind.” According to Marty,

It’s IEP meetings, and schedule meetings, and staffing meetings, and professional development meetings, and parent meetings, and just ALL the meetings...I am almost dreading the next six weeks because of so many meetings.

In addition to all of the work happening to prepare for the end of the school year, she was spending large amounts of time preparing for a summer reading programming for at-risk students. In an attempt to avoid cutting any teaching positions for the following year because of budget cuts, Marty was also contemplating the restructuring of staff for the Fall. In addition, she had begun work on the class schedule for the next year. All of these challenges had Marty stating, “This time of year is crazy! I just can’t stay afloat it seems. But, welcome to the world of the principalship in April.”

Even with her hectic schedule, Marty was pleased with the results of a few major areas that she had been working on over the course of the year. Marty explained that just recently the superintendent distributed his annual “Climate and Culture” survey to all teachers, support staff, and custodians in the district. Throughout the survey nearly



everyone associated with the middle school had answered the questions regarding Marty and her administrative qualities very positively. These data had Marty explaining, “I feel like climate and culture wise, relationship wise, I’m on the right track.”

Another area of success for Marty was with teacher evaluations. During her evaluations with teachers, Marty made sure to include all of the requirements set out by the district and union contract, but she decided to add a dialogue session. This approach worked wonderfully, especially with one of her teachers who had been really struggling during the year. Because of the extra work that Marty had done to meet with this teacher eight additional times throughout the spring, the teacher became reenergized in her teaching, starting coming in on weekends to work, and applied to graduate school in order to improve as a reading teacher. When the teacher told Marty about this plan for furthering her education, Marty was “just floored.” As her principal, Marty was so happy and proud for this individual.

A third positive that occurred for Marty was the on-going relationship with her mentor. According to Marty, the two of them had continued to “meet pretty regularly.” In addition, at the suggestion of her mentor, the two even took a class together at the local Area Education Agency entitled, “Fierce Conversations” based upon the book by the same title written by Susan Scott. Marty exclaimed, “It’s awesome...probably one of the best things I’ve done.”

In terms of planning for next year, Marty and her leadership team were considering having the entire faculty study the cognitive development of adolescents. Marty hoped this would give her teachers a better understanding and appreciation of why

middle school students act the way they do and if they are “expecting kids to do things that their brains are not ready for.” Along with this study, Marty and her leadership team were planning on doing some reading on student relationships and differentiation as it relates to classroom teaching. Marty believed the goal of this reading is to help teachers learn how to reach “middle of the road” kids who are typically forgotten.

Unfortunately, when asked if any negative things had happened since the start of the fourth quarter, Marty responded with quick laughter and then a serious tone,

Oh everyday! It is a job where it can consume you and a lot of negative comes at you and so yeah, I don’t know how you can love a job as much as I do and hate some elements of it like I do. That just brings you down.

As she elaborated on this statement, Marty explained that in reading the responses from the survey, there was a perception by some of her teachers that she spends too much time with the at-risk students in the building at the cost of the other students. Marty said she does this because these are the kids that need the most help, and of the kids that are referred to her by teachers, 90% are the at-risk students. Marty lamented,

I just feel like no matter what you do you’re kind of in a Catch-22. There seems like, in this position, there’s always going to be a level of dissatisfaction with your performance and that your intentions are sometimes misperceived; and so, that is probably the hardest part, I think, is that you work your tail off and it’s not even that they don’t appreciate it, but a lot of the things that I’m working my tail off are because of what teachers have told me and then you kind of get your hand slapped for it.

Another area of concern for Marty was with maintaining balance in her life. Because she was spending so much time at school during the day, at nights, and on weekends, her family was “very frustrated” with her. She tried to explain to them her daily schedule by saying,

Well, this is how my day looks when I go in, this is what I think I am going to do, and these are the meetings I have. And then, you get a flood of referrals, and a flood of questions that you need to address immediately. So all those things that you set aside to do today now have been pushed off, but the deadlines are still there, you still have to do it all.

This feeling of a lack of balance in her life continued to cause concern for Marty in terms of her health. Though she had been back to her doctor and things looked better, Marty still was not exercising and her sleep had been limited. “The impact that this job is having on the physical and emotional side of life worries the heck out of me,” Marty said. Because of this unbalance, Marty planned to take the summer off from her doctoral studies and “take a break from it all.” Marty reflected, “I don’t know how long someone can take this amount of stress and be healthy.”

As the time for our conversation started to run out, I asked Marty to describe her life as a middle school principal at this time. Marty related with a deep sigh, “probably stretched...a little bit unbalanced...probably *a lot* unbalanced...stressed...probably unappreciated...but still hopeful.”

#### June: It is Quite a Bit Calmer Now

My last interview with Marty took place two weeks after school had been released for summer vacation. With the students and teachers gone, it was very quiet in CMS on the day we met. As we began our conversation, I asked Marty how the final weeks of school had gone for her. Marty replied that all the way through the last quarter of school things continued to be very busy and hectic, especially with meetings. According to Marty, “The meetings--Wow! There were meetings for about everything you can think of!”

On top of all that, following district policy, each school building administrator had to evaluate his or her staff on a yearly rotating basis, and this year was the middle school principal's turn. This meant that Marty had to complete a formal evaluation for each of her teachers by the end of the school year. Unfortunately, Marty said she put these off too long because it was her first time doing the complete evaluation process. She admitted, "I spent an inordinate amount of time on it and it bumped up right to the end of the school year." One of the ways she approached these evaluations was to add more ongoing conversations to the process and apply many of the techniques and strategies she learned during her professional development training involving the book *Fierce Conversations*.

Another area that took up her time at the end of the year involved Marty's work to prepare her teachers for the following fall. In keeping with her goal to improve the climate of the school, Marty paid special attention to ensure that when teachers left for the year they had all the information they needed in order to be successful when they came back from summer vacation. It was Marty's goal that there would not be any "surprises for them when they came back."

Another area that Marty worked on during the last month of school was creating a class schedule for next year. According to Marty, "That is a tremendous undertaking at a middle school level," especially when the school board gave permission to add a Spanish language class to the exploratory class offerings. In Marty's opinion having this new class was "very exciting for our kids," but it meant that she had to revise the middle

school schedule yet again. Upon reflecting on all the work she had done over the year, Marty realized,

This is the thing. The work is always there no matter how hard I work! I will never get caught up. I think that is just the nature of the job. If you want to do a good job, the work is never going to be done. And I think just being more realistic with myself and giving myself more time away is good for everybody involved.

Unfortunately there were also a number of bad things that happened at the end of the year for Marty. During the last month of school, the district's At-Risk Coordinator, with whom she worked closely, had to take some personal time off and was not available for several weeks. Because of this, Marty stated, "A lot of balls got dropped."

The other major problem involved a let down by Marty's teachers and staff. Marty explained that CMS has a policy that "if a student has to stay late the student has to call their parents and let them know they are staying after school and will have to be picked up later than usual." However, during the last week of school one student who was required to stay late failed to call his parents and just started walking home.

The student's family was very angry, and Marty, as the principal, felt she had to "take the heat" for this situation. To make matters worse, the very next night, the sister of the same student did not get picked up right after school by her parents and the school lost track of her for a little while. Again, Marty, as the principal, was the one who had to "take the heat" from the parents.

From these experiences, Marty was "angry and frustrated." In her opinion, her teachers and staff had simply let down at the end of the school year and were not following procedures they knew about and had followed all year long. And that left her as the one in the hot seat. According to Marty, "These were two of the most needy kids that

we have, and for teachers not to have a clue where they were or how they were going to get home and not care, it infuriated me!” Marty sarcastically laughed, “I had some fierce conversations about that!”

These negative situations, along with the hectic nature of the job, had Marty commenting on the year as a whole,

It was challenging. It was challenging to stay upbeat and be the one that is going to move people in a positive direction, but there are days where realistically you are down in the dumps and you feel like crap because of things that have happened or things that you’ve done or that you’ve messed up or whatever. And, I feel like, as a principal, you’re not allowed to have those days. You’re not allowed to be less than perfect. And that is a very high standard and an unneeded stressor in an already stressful job.

It was Marty’s perception that over the course of the year, “You just wear down. You start with this awesome momentum and just all the nights that you are there and those long 13-14 hour days, and it just wears on you.” Overall though, Marty found that because she could turn to her superintendent, high school principal, at-risk coordinator, counselor, mentor, teacher leadership team, and other professionals outside her district for support that she was able to make it through the year in a positive manner.

After school got out for summer vacation, Marty was still working in her office. When asked what she was working on, Marty described, “I am working on all the stuff that you just keep piling up and piling up and putting off and now you have to go through so that’s what I am doing these days.” However, Marty did note with a smile on her face, “It is quite a bit calmer,” so she was now able to get the needed work done. It was Marty’s plan to follow her 11 month contract and work through June, take July off, and come back to start working in August. Given the pace of the year and her health

concerns, she felt confident that this plan made sense. She was not taking any classes this summer and said, “I am feeling pretty good about that!”

At the end of our last interview, when asked what words she would use to describe the life of a middle school principal near the end of the first year, Marty responded,

It is very much like a roller coaster. Kind of like ‘manic depression,’ now that I think about it. You are so high and you are so low in a very short amount of time...It is very unpredictable...It is a balancing act between all the professional duties you have, but also personally trying to do what is good for you...It’s very difficult and challenging.

When Marty contemplated her preparation for the middle school principalship, she seemed to soften some of the criticism she had leveled back in the fall. Marty stated, “I just, honestly, I just don’t think there is a lot you *can* do to prepare for this. You have to prepare yourself to be unprepared, because you don’t know what is going to come at you.” When asked what advice she would give to those individuals looking at becoming school administrators at the middle level, Marty explained,

Take one day at a time. Breathe. Take some time for yourself. Stay balanced from the beginning, and, it is so difficult, but I think you do a service to everyone else if you do that. Build a support system professionally of people you respect, admire, and trust...I think just to expect not to know and to be okay with that. You will figure it out.

### Karen’s Story

#### August-December: Baptism by Fire

Driving into Brownsville on the quiet two-lane highway is not unlike driving into many of the small towns in central Iowa. As I entered the city limits, I noticed a water tower that proudly displayed the town’s name overlooking two large grain elevators at

the local Farmers Co-Op. Beyond the convenience store and gas station, Main Street was lined with a hardware store, the local food center, the town bar, and a few vacant buildings with “for sale” signs in them. Further on, at the east end of Main Street, I encountered a sturdy looking three-story brick school building from the 1930s overlooking a modern looking single story addition built in the 1990s. This is Austin-Brownsville Middle School (ABMS).

Due to a pattern of decreasing population in both Austin and Brownsville during the past decade, in 2003 school leaders joined together and finalized a whole-grade sharing agreement between the two communities. This meant both towns still had their own elementary school buildings, but they shared school buildings for their middle and high schools. Since Austin has a population of over 2,000 compared to fewer than 900 people who live in Brownsville, it was decided that Austin would be the home of the 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade high school, and Brownsville would be the home of the 5-8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school.

As I drove past the middle school on that crisp November morning, the statue monument dedicated to each of the United States Armed Forces in the front of the building caught my eye. Around the back of the school was the parking lot and it was there I saw three yellow school buses dropping off chatty students. Following the students into the building, I walked by rows of bright blue lockers on each side of the wide hallway of the new addition. In the background I could hear a country music song playing softly from the school custodian’s closet. As I continued to walk to the main office, I passed by the teachers’ lounge and could see, on the table, a pan of brownies



with a handwritten sign that read, “Happy Birthday” setting near it. Behind the table personalized coffee cups hung neatly on the wall above the sink.

As I entered the main office, the school’s secretary pleasantly greeted me and, after learning my name, led me back to the principal’s office. The office was fairly large with a desk on one side of the room and a conference table on the other side. On the desk was a computer, a stack of filing containers, and a number of paper piles. The conference table sat empty. Along the west wall of the office were bookshelves filled with professional binders, pictures of family members, and a bottle of water. Hanging from the north wall were framed diplomas from a number of universities. Because it was filled with all these items, even though the office seemed bigger than a typical office, it felt rather cramped. I was met at the door by Karen, the first year principal at ABMS.

Karen was about 5’8” tall, thin, and had dark brown curly hair that was styled just below her shoulders. As she shook my hand, she pulled up the sleeve of the light-blue fleece pullover she wore which displayed the school’s mascot on the front pocket. After introductions, Karen and I sat down in two older yellow cloth chairs at the conference table and began our conversation.

Karen was 43 years old and married to a man who runs an alternative school and, until this year, he also coached high school varsity wrestling in a nearby town. The two of them have three kids: a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, 1<sup>st</sup> grader, and a preschooler. Prior to her first principalship, Karen taught German and Vocal music for nine years at the secondary level. During this time she completed a Masters degree in counseling and became the K-12 counselor for the Austin school district. However, after six years in that position,

when the towns completed the whole-grade sharing agreement, Karen became the K-8 counselor for ABMS. She worked in this position for the next five years prior to accepting the middle school principalship in the same building. Karen explained her duties as the counselor,

At this district, being a small district, it's doing all those extra duties as assigned, and as we kept switching over superintendents, other duties kept coming my way. And, we kind of realized that I was the data person anyway, so it was a natural fit then for me to start working on the APR (Annual Progress Report related to reporting for No Child Left Behind legislation) and then the next step was the CSIP (Comprehensive School Improvement Plan) came along. So then I kind of ran that committee. We wrote the CSIP together and then the AYP (Annual Yearly Progress related to reporting for No Child Left Behind legislation) came my way and so it just kind of evolved into I was always in charge of all the testing and in charge of the data and giving the data to the teachers and providing the in-service on all of that. Then just being in and out of the classrooms as a counselor and doing behavior observations and constantly helping teachers out as far as interventions they way wanted to do.

It was during this time that she began her course work in Educational Leadership. To complete her degree, she traveled back and forth to a nearby city two times per week to meet with a cohort of other students. When asked about how her program prepared her for the principalship, Karen believed she had a "wonderful group of professors" that taught her and that "the university did an excellent job of preparing me." Karen explained how being so involved with administrative duties as a counselor really helped her during the program because she worked on the 400 internship hours right in her own district. When questioned whether she had any coursework specifically devoted to the middle level principalship during her program of study, Karen stated,

I was more prepared to lead in general, but not specifically at the middle school level. I think we have a tendency to forget the middle level in our preparatory programs, so we didn't have a whole lot of focus on the middle level.

However, Karen believed that because she taught middle school students for nine years and then counseled middle school students for another 11 years, she was able to apply what she needed from this knowledge and experience to her job as the principal.

As she neared the end of her Educational Leadership program, Karen spoke about another advantage she believed she had towards her first year as the middle school principal. Karen explained,

I was hired back in March and the superintendent started grooming me at that point. He said, "Well, you know, you're going to be doing it anyway next year so just do it." So the mid-terms, the last quarter grades, any parent concerns, anything that happened from April on...it was pretty much baptism by fire starting in April.

However, Karen wished she had some more professional development on evaluation, observation, and school finance. Karen contemplated,

I think what would probably have helped me here. It was just kind of assumed that I knew the evaluation process because I had been through it (as a counselor), but what I found out was that we were missing some little pieces...I think it has taken me a long time to figure out what I am supposed to be doing and this is how I am supposed to write this up.

Once she was hired for the job, Karen spent the summer preparing for the upcoming year. Her major goal was to change the culture and climate of the school. As the school counselor in the building for the past 11 years, Karen worked alongside of a "big, burly, old football player principal who used intimidation to motivate his school." Karen explained that even though discipline was excellent and behavior problems were rare, tension hid just beneath the surface. Her counseling skills seemed to tell her that despite the orderly appearance, teachers and students were really just hiding anxiety. So, as a first year principal Karen was excited about "being able to kind of open that climate

up and bring in a lot more of the ‘Character Counts’ and...just change that feeling and get that culture as more of a community.”

However, along with the excitement of positively changing the culture and climate, Karen had some apprehension and nervousness at starting into the new position. Although she had been working in the same school district for the past 11 years and knew the staff very well, Karen said,

I think my biggest concern was now I have made this jump, how’s the faculty going to accept me? Because I stayed in the same district, it wasn’t like I was brand new to the people. I really thought I would be okay, as far as my faculty that I was friends with, but it was like, how are they going to take me now? I mean I am the one that’s the supervisor.

To combat these feelings and concerns, Karen spent the first few days of the new school year being very congenial. She made sure there were donuts in the faculty lounge and that she was being very social with everyone. However, the first early dismissal day for teacher professional development training, Karen recalled,

It was time for lunch and I was back here working or doing something to get things ready for later and they were gone. You know, it just kind of flew by them. I think...my husband joked and said, “Well okay this is it now, you’ve lost all your friends.” It’s true. I’m the outcast now in that sense and to me it doesn’t bother me a whole lot but...

Since those early days, school has run by pretty fast for Karen. On a typical day she was at school by 6:30 a.m., an hour or more before her teachers arrived. Then she spent the first period of the day trying to get out and around to most of the classrooms. Karen explained, “That’s the nice thing about elementary and middle school, I get to get out. I am out all the time. I’m with the kids all the time.” During the remainder of the morning, she attended to the managerial aspects of the job: working on email

communication, district reports, and other paperwork. She also led an 8<sup>th</sup> grade advisory group for 20 minutes during that time. At lunchtime, Karen supervised the cafeteria.

After lunch, Karen spent most of her afternoon hours working on an unexpected duty that had been assigned to her a few weeks into the school year--Middle School Activities Director (AD). Karen sarcastically joked, "Yeah, it came under those, 'I didn't think administrators were supposed to have other assigned duties,' but I got it." When asked about her feelings towards this added assignment Karen explained,

Well, I am one of those I am not really good at saying no; I am not going to do it. If something is given to me I will deal with it. I will do the absolute best that I can. I may not always be happy about it, but I am going to give it my all...110% like I do everything else, and quite honestly, it was not...it was very overwhelming right away at the very beginning. I knew I had to buck up and do it. Like I said, it was really really tough. It got a little bit easier and then, when we got into things, it got very very busy. I didn't mind the busyness of it, keeping things going, things like that, but right now we're at that lull stage where I can breath again so am I going to keep it? I would love to get rid of the AD part of it, but I have a feeling I will keep it. I don't think the school board knows the extent I have to spend all that time or all the extra time you know that has to be placed into it.

In addition to the AD duties, Karen also spent her afternoons attending meetings, preparing for board meetings, and working with any discipline situations that came up. Following the end of school each day, Karen supervised all the games and activities, which usually kept her at school well into the evening.

Throughout the first nine weeks of school, Karen found herself swamped with school-wide initiatives such as improving the rigor and relevance of classroom instruction, approaching the newly-mandated Iowa Core Curriculum by using curriculum mapping strategies, and investigating a new computer-based student management system. Though she had all that she could handle, Karen believed she had a very supportive

administrative team. Karen explained, “If I’m stuck on something, I don’t hesitate to call one of them. I am not fearful at all that they’re going to judge me or anything.” Towards the middle of October, however, her feelings began to change. Karen was overwhelmed. She lamented,

I was at that I am not sure I can...I knew I could handle it but...kind of that questioning, What was I getting myself into or what the hell was I doing...It was getting ITBS ready, we had homecoming in there, I had a problem with the special education teacher and this other teacher, I had only been assigned the AD position for a few weeks and I was given empty contracts and not full schedules for basketball and wrestling...you know...bogus dates. I mean we had a basketball game on Christmas Eve and...I...it was really messing...so it took us, and I was so many hours trying to straighten out some of the things like that, but you know, I wasn’t too happy.

Along with the stress from her athletic director duties, Karen also had stress that came with her primary job—the middle school principal. Karen noted,

At that time I also had the APR that was due and I had board things that I needed to get to them and you just feel like when do I have time? I had a couple of truancy problems with some kids and I was constantly dealing with that part of it and the parents and so...I think everything just kind of hits you at once.

As we moved toward the end of our first interview, I asked Karen to describe her life as a middle school principal in the fall of her first year. Karen quickly responded,

It is exciting and invigorating...Never once is the list of things I come in to accomplish, accomplished...it is just a constant movement, constant excitement, and just fun. I really just love it...You know, even those rough days, I still go home and, I still have my glass of wine, but it is just fun...I think a big part is just being with the kids...I think a lot of times in the principal position you get stuck back in your office and you’re dealing with all those bad kids and all that stuff and you don’t get to get out and see the kids.

When I asked Karen if she had any final thoughts before I left for the day, she said,

I’ve almost made it to Christmas! I’m almost there! If I make it through my semester exams for the first time, we’ll be okay...I am ready for Christmas. I

didn't have a summer. I was here pretty much everyday this summer just trying to get ready...so I am ready for a break.

### February: Master Contract, Negotiations, and Budget Cuts

As I returned to ABMS towards the end of February, I wondered how Karen was doing fulfilling the job as middle school principal *and* middle school activities director. I wondered if her feelings of being overwhelmed had lessened. Upon entering her office, she once again greeted me at the door, and we sat down at the conference table. Looking around the office, I noticed that not much had changed. The only thing that was different seemed to be a pile of administrative magazines was now on the corner of her desk. I wondered if she had time to read them.

When I asked how she was doing since returning from the winter holiday season, Karen said she came back to school feeling much better. She was rested and rejuvenated. In addition, her husband started taking over more with responsibilities at home. Also, she smiled as she explained that her daughter was on the 7<sup>th</sup> grade basketball team, so this meant, "instead of everyone at home having family time, it was family time here." And, in December, her in-laws had moved to town and had taken on some childcare responsibilities. In addition, Karen said that since Christmas break, "We have come a little bit closer together as a staff and I think I am seeing them start to do a lot more things specifically related to middle school." Because of these events, Karen expressed that "at the end of the semester, in December, boy things were going really, really well."

However, right away in January after the break, problems developed. Even though the master contract for teachers had passed back in December, negotiations were starting between the teachers' union and the school board related to budgetary concerns.

The major problem was that the negotiation team was made up of teachers from Karen's building, and they were supposed to represent all the teachers at the three other buildings in the district as well. Unfortunately, many of the teachers not on the team lacked confidence in the negotiating teachers. This led to a tense and strained climate. Bickering was commonplace. As a result of this situation, Karen, who was not on the negotiating team, explained, "I was finding more, you know, I had to mediate teacher-to-teacher more than having to worry about the kids."

In addition, Karen discovered that a few teachers started to fall back into old habits of doing things the way the previous principal had done them. This was frustrating for Karen who felt like she had to "retrain them again." Because of all this, Karen admitted, "There's just a few nights I went home and said, 'Why am I putting up with this stuff?'"

These feelings of frustration continued throughout the rest of January and into February. During this time, Karen found herself very busy. Because there had been lots of sickness in her school building, Karen found herself regularly covering classes for ill teachers while still trying to maintain her jobs as principal and AD. Her AD responsibilities placed her on the run, often with three events running simultaneously. As a result, Karen found herself at school four to five nights a week trying to get everything done. These struggles caused Karen to jokingly say,

I was begging for a snow day this week! Actually, one of those two hour late starts you know or you kind of get in that habit...it was really sad, but in December and January we had so many of those and I was able to get so much done and now we're into this February mode and you're here all the time and this lull that hits and I think it's I am just finishing up basketball, basketball, and wrestling seasons and you know where, wow, I was here constantly four or five



nights a week trying to get everything done, and now I am like I really need to be home a little bit, my house is showing that and my husband is saying that.

From these feelings, Karen reflected on her former career as a counselor in comparison to her career as a principal. She explained,

Sometimes I look back and think when I was a counselor I purposely set aside time to do reading and that was my individual development plan to do my reading and I would focus each month on something so I knew I was searching out things. There's no time to do any of that. That is probably one of the things I keep saying is why did I get into this? You know am I going to be as good as a leader as I can be without knowing all the research and knowing all that stuff in the magazines, and so I am struggling with that part of it right now. And I don't see an end to that for a little while.

With so many different areas needing attention, I asked if there was anything that her Educational Leadership program could have done differently to prepare her for the middle school? Karen answered that more discussion on time management and juggling so many things would have helped, specifically as it relates to effectively balancing the responsibilities at home with the responsibilities at work.

Even though Karen had encountered numerous struggles since January and seemed to be spread incredibly thin, she could still positively reflect on her job as principal by saying, "I've never had that feeling yet that the principalship wasn't a good career choice. I had a little hesitation on certain portions of the job or how am I ever going to get this done? As a matter of fact, I felt like why hadn't I done it a few years earlier? So then I went into a life of meetings and all that. And I can honestly tell them I love it. I absolutely *love* it."

At the end of February, Karen found a short reprieve time. Winter sports came to an end, and spring sports did not get fully started until the end of March. This meant

Karen could spend more of her time directly on the principalship. Karen explained, “I think when we first met it was a lot of survival. Am I going to survive this fall thing? Now I am kind of feeling like okay, I am going to survive, now am I moving the right way? How do I need to develop now and develop more within the building?”

With this added time, Karen started into evaluations of her teachers. Karen explained,

I am about halfway through my evaluations right now so I am feeling much better about that now. I have a much better handle on things. It's been interesting to have the teachers process through things like, “Oh this isn't the way it was last time” or and I said I want the evaluation to be a positive thing, this is how we're both going to grow. And so each evaluation I have done so far has been very very positive which is good. I mean I am sure all hell will break loose and I will have something else come up and the ones that I have left are a little bit tougher. I still have two new teachers, well my counselor and then second year teacher so we have to finish some of the major things that way. So, I have a lot of paper work to finish up and if anything is looming over me it is probably all that paper work thing.

These positive feelings throughout the evaluation process helped Karen develop stronger relationships with her teachers. They seemed to respect the changes she had made in the evaluation procedures and appreciated her perspective as a principal compared to her predecessor. However, even as some areas started to improve, other difficulties were starting to develop. Karen explained,

They keep telling me if I make it through February and then kind of starting through March things start to climb back up, but I just keep looking at the budget and cuts and how many cutbacks do we need to be looking at and all that stuff and negotiations and so a little more challenging there.

At the end of our second interview, I asked Karen to describe her life as a middle school principal at the end of February. Karen responded,

I guess very enthusiastic. Probably melancholy in a sense that what I think the question is, ‘Am I driving the building in the right way?’ And, I just worry about that. I think I am a little worried about that sometimes. But, right now, I am pretty confident about what we are doing.

#### April: When You’re Going Through Hell, Keep on Going

At the end of April, I returned to ABMS and found Karen sitting at her desk staring hopelessly at her computer screen in a panic. The school was right in the middle of their second semester Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) testing. In addition, it was mid-term time at the school. This meant that as teachers were completing their mid-term evaluations and report cards, they were sending these electronically to Karen who was responsible for uploading them directly into their computer system. Unfortunately, there had been a technical problem and the data for three classes had been lost. As I asked if she was okay, Karen replied flatly,

We have no idea what happened to them. So, I’m imputing kids and I just found out a kid went to a totally different exploratory. I didn’t know anything about it. So, it’s just you know, there’s always something exciting going on.

As Karen sorted through the technical problem at her desk, I scanned the office noticing some changes that had been made. Behind Karen’s desk, hanging on the wall, were hand drawn pictures by her preschool aged son. Around the office, three live plants had been brought in. Near one of these plants was an old rocking chair. On one of the shelves in the office was a small relaxation fountain that bubbled water over tiny rocks. On another bookshelf was a CD player with a box set of CDs entitled, “Natural Dreams.” Next to the CD player was a stack of papers teachers were using as artifacts for their teacher portfolio evaluations.

When Karen resolved the situation with the class data, she came over to the conference table and sank into the chair with a big sigh. To lighten the mood, I started our conversation by asking about all the new room decorations. Karen smiled and said that she had to bring all that “stuff” in because she was spending more time here than at home. She then went on to say that as the principal she had the responsibility of completing the annual evaluations of her teachers. She had done a number of walkthroughs and had finished all but two formal evaluations. However, Karen stated, “It drives me nuts, absolutely drives me nuts to have my desk look like that right now and to know that these artifacts are hanging over me and you know I have done walkthroughs, but haven’t documented any walkthroughs this month.”

When I asked if any other concerns had happened since our last visit, Karen explained that the teachers and district finalized the negotiations related to the budgetary concerns. This had improved collegial relationships in the building, but now there were district budget cuts for the 2009-2010 school year that were going to affect the morale in the building. The major budget cut that affected Karen was a loss of one teaching position at her school. Although this was just a single teacher and it was not as severe as it might have been, the impact would be significant. According to Karen,

Middle school concept wise, depending on what schedule I end up with, you know I totally blow it out of the water with one of my schedules where I am going down to lunch shifts so the kids will be a mixed group in there instead of by grade level where they have their social time that I really like. One of my schedules I move my advisory to the very end of the day; I am not liking that very well, because I think we are going to lose some of that relationship time with some of those teachers and other adults in the building.

Along with academic responsibilities, Karen continued dealing with extra-curricular responsibilities. As the AD of the school, Karen found herself busy organizing four separate track meets over a two-week period, one of which was the conference track meet, which involved students from 10 other schools. Karen complained, "I don't know how I got that here my first year as AD!" Nevertheless, Karen noted, "If I make it through the next two weeks with these track meets, if I make it through tomorrow night, I will be happy."

On a negative note, Karen dealt with a major discipline situation during this time. She explained that the school had recently experienced a string of thefts. In the course of one week, several iPods had been taken out of student lockers. As with any investigation, Karen spent a great deal of time talking to individual students about the crime. In the end Karen had a good idea of the possible suspects. At that point she called in the local sheriff's department to finalize the investigation and deal with the legal aspects of the situation. Karen admitted,

I was kind of waiting for this bomb to drop and, unfortunately, I have some parents who are not very good supervisors of their kids and they have gotten into quite a bit of trouble, and I think there's going to be more trouble coming down. But, it is the same group of kids and it is sad to see that some of these kids are going down that road and it's hard to have them here. We're not used to that here.

The fact that time was running out on the year also was bothering Karen and she admitted,

I just...you just get to this stage where you're overwhelmed...I have this stack of artifacts over here that I haven't even started on, and I keep saying I'll do it next week, I'll do it next weekend...I was talking to my mentor the other day and she said welcome to, you know when you hit the budget cuts and schedules, and all that stuff all at once, she said welcome to the principalship. This is the two months that are really really bad and I'm like, UGGGH, I thought that was

January and February...And I go back to my theme song, *When You're Going Through Hell, Keep on Going*.

On the positive side, there had been a nice lull in extracurricular responsibilities between the time that the winter sports season ended and the spring sport season began. During this time, Karen got a lot of work done, including helping to support her teachers in the production of a school musical to help boost the students in the middle school. Karen described,

We had a wonderful musical that included 90 kids. I mean the performance was just terrific and I think that was huge. We brought the 5<sup>th</sup> graders up and I allowed the kids to watch who were not involved. Total difference in the kids. I mean they absolutely were mesmerized by it. It was really neat for them to see what their peers were doing.

However, Karen admitted that during that lull time she still had the stack of professional magazines on her desk. She made an attempt at reading one magazine during the day, but came to the realization that there was not a chance she was going to get to any of those so she “just knocked them off into the garbage can.”

Following Spring break, Karen began to move toward end of the year planning by working on the class schedule, preparing summative teacher evaluations, and deciding the path her teachers would work on for their professional development training. Karen stated, “I think the Iowa Core is going to be our focus next year and really focus on that alignment with our new curriculum manager and you know, let’s just see how we can up the bar I guess.”

Although she was dealing with some of the negatives of the principalship, Karen made an effort to improve the balance in her personal life. She started exercising again, which, prior to becoming the principal, had been an important focus area in her life. In

the past she had tried to exercise at least five times per week, walking between three to four miles a day. However, she had to take the whole winter off because of time constraints at work. Further, Karen lamented, "I feel guilty when I get home. I am not going to go for a walk or exercise, I want to be with my kids, you know. But I'm terrible. I'm terrible about guilt that way, always have been." The result was that Karen gained about seven pounds this year.

Another way that Karen worked to add balance to her life was by attempting to utilize the time she had while preparing supper each night. During this time, Karen would listen to soft, relaxing, piano music. Her children, however, had a different take on it. They called it "Mom's depressing music."

Beyond trying to relax and spend more time at home, Karen and her family began to look ahead to the end of the school year. They began making exciting plans for a family trip the first full week in June. Karen, her husband, and kids designed a mini-vacation to Wisconsin. Karen reported, "We set four or five days aside and said this is it, no one is doing anything on these days, so I am looking forward to that."

As our conversation wrapped up for the day, I asked Karen for one or two words to describe her life as a middle school principal at the end of April. Karen responded,

Oh, let's think... 'harried.' I still go back to just 'excitement,' down right excitement. There's something about these kids that just keep you going... this is just a fun level that just, wow, there is just constant movement, constant excitement... besides excitement and just the craziness most days, I would describe it as 'fun.' I mean just, I don't know too many jobs that you can go to and see, I have 194 kids and 194 different personalities and be able to talk with them and just relate to them and I guess that is probably a big part of it, just fun.

June: It was Just Crazy

I met with Karen three weeks after school got out for the summer, because she had taken the family vacation to Wisconsin and had only recently returned to Austin. As I entered the school Karen was not there. She told me over the phone that her husband had started teaching summer school, and she had the kids until he finished for the day. This meant that she might be a little late for our meeting

While I waited for Karen, I read a job posting on the employment board at the school. There was an advertisement for an Activities Director in the Austin-Brownsville school district. I smiled thinking Karen was finally going to be able to move out from this extra duty. Shortly after reading this advertisement, Karen arrived. Before we went into her office I motioned to the advertisement for a new Activities Director. Karen nonchalantly said, "Oh that's for the high school AD position, not mine." As we walked back to her office I expressed my condolences on the AD situation. Karen responded that she wished they would take that duty away but understands that they probably will not. She seemed resigned to continuing with that portion of her job. Then we sat down in the yellow cloth chairs and began our last interview.

I started the conversation by asking Karen how the last weeks of school went since the end of April. Karen told me that things had been very busy, especially with end of the year meetings. Karen explained that along with her regular meetings she found herself involved in a school advisory committee that was working on the Iowa Core Curriculum and a facilities committee to look at the possibility of building a new middle school. According to Karen, "It just seemed like some Wednesday nights I probably had



free, but other than that, even through weekends, it was just crazy...I was amazed at the number of meetings that were piled in at the end.”

In addition to meetings, Karen finished up track meets and moved into softball and baseball season. With all these activities, Karen stated,

April and May were absolutely nuts! I mean a lot crazier than...and maybe it was part me putting more stress on myself, too...but a lot crazier than I was planning on it to be...I thought I had a handle on everything and my time management and then all of a sudden it was pretty much shot to hell.

To celebrate the year, Karen hosted an End-of-the-Year Luncheon for her staff. For this event she was in charge of getting the barbeque pork, side dishes, and “all that stuff.” Karen joked at the chaos of these preparations,

It reminded me of college when I was crunching and trying to cram as much as I could in at the end, and so I was up until 2:00 a.m. baking bars and trying to get everything else ready and doing my summative evaluations sitting at my kitchen table drinking tea and it was just I must have done that for three days in a row. They tell me now that it is over it will never happen again that way. I am not sure I believe them.

As she closed out the school year, Karen felt like things had gone very well. She had written all of her summative teacher evaluations, finished the paperwork related to the school budget, completed all the staffing assignments, finalized the master calendar and schedule, got the student handbook edited and to the press, and checked all her teachers out the last day. In the end, Karen felt like she was prepared for just about everything and because of this she did not have any real surprises. However, Karen had to admit, “I was absolutely exhausted the day of check out.”

Following the end of the school year, Karen worked for one more week, and then she and her family took their vacation. Karen exclaimed, “It was good for me to leave at

that time.” However, when she got back to town, she was right back into work. The school district was working to install a new student management data system, and Karen had to help get all the excel sheets and school information ready for the technician. After this was in place, Karen, the other administrators, and clerical staff were to be trained on the system. The rest of the summer Karen planned to come in for just one day a week in July, which, according to Karen, “is more than I am supposed to, but you know how it is.”

On the home front, Karen’s husband was teaching summer school so Karen was back in charge of her kids. Even though Karen was having some struggles related to reintroducing the kids to “Mom’s Rules” at home, she could definitely say she appreciated her kids more now that she had spent a year as a principal. According to Karen, “You know it is kind of funny when I go home after dealing with certain things during the day, I definitely appreciate the fact that I have them and I am not chasing them all over town like some of the other parents out there.”

In terms of her health and wellness, Karen got a Wii Fit for Mother’s Day. Unfortunately, Karen lamented, “I have only used it once.” However, Karen was proud to note that her family did get a dog and it was her job to walk the dog each morning. Karen said, “I now walk two and a half miles every morning.”

At the end of our interview time together, Karen described the life of a middle school principal during the last quarter of school. She said, “It was very hectic, very crazy. It was exciting at the end and a lot of fun. It was just constant—just when you think you’ve got things settled something else comes up.”

Before I left for the day, Karen talked about her Educational Leadership program and if it had truly prepared her to be a principal of a middle school. In Karen's opinion, because middle school students are going through so many changes, pre-service administrators need to understand that during their middle school years students "need something a little bit different." Because of this perspective Karen explained, "it would be nice to have more focus on middle level learning" during her Educational Leadership program. If programs emphasized middle level learning, Karen believed it would help future middle school administrators in having an understanding of developmentally appropriate "discipline strategies and ways to communicate with kids." Karen also wished she would have had some type of timeline that explained what she was supposed to be preparing for each month. This would have helped with her overall effectiveness as a principal.

My final question was if she had any advice to give to pre-service administrators now that she had completed her first year as a principal. Karen reflected and said, "A big part of it is finding colleagues that you are really comfortable with--people that you can go to when you have those questions like I have no idea what to do here." Karen appreciated the help she received from her superintendent, elementary principal, mentor, and buddy principal from a program set up by her state administrative organization. Karen noted, "Without this help, I probably couldn't have survived." In addition, Karen advised, "Find something for your own mental health." Karen suggested finding at least one good wellness thing to do each month. This could be anything from going out to

dinner to visiting another school for a day, to taking a day off for mental health. Karen joked, “I even lost a personal day this year because I didn’t take it!”

## CHAPTER 5

### THEME ANALYSIS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the themes discovered during the analysis of the data in association to the current findings in the literature. However, before outlining discovered themes, the first section of this chapter will explain the constant comparison method of analyzing data.

#### Data Analysis

The method used to analyze data that was collected during this study was a constant comparison method of data analysis. The goal of constant comparison analysis is to generate a theory, or a set of themes (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), there are five main characteristics of constant comparison analysis: “(a) to build a theory, not test it; (b) to give researchers analytic tools for analyzing data; (c) to assist researchers in understanding multiple meanings from the data; (d) to give researchers a systematic process as well as a creative process for analyzing data; and (e) to help researchers identify, create, and see the relationships among parts of the data when constructing a theme” (as cited in Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008, p. 596). Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2008) go on to explain, “there are three main stages of constant comparison analysis. The first stage is open coding. The second stage is axial coding. The final stage is called selective coding” (p. 596).

By using a constant comparison approach, I was able to compare the three different stories throughout the data collection process and look for similarities and

differences. During this process I looked for aspects of the interview data that were unique to one of the respondents, and which aspects of the interview data that were found in the experience of multiple respondents (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). When the stories were complete, I was able to use a coding system to look for relationships between the different interviews. Then as codes were grouped together into similar categories, I was able to create theory out of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

As I started into the data collection process, I really wanted to gain a true understanding of the nature of the first year of the principalship for each of the people I was interviewing. With this goal I used the following statements and questions to help guide my first interview:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Tell me about your educational background and path to this principalship.
3. Why did you make the decision to become a principal?
4. What do you envision the job of the principal will be like?
5. Since you learned that you were hired as the principal did you do anything special to prepare for the job?
6. What are your thoughts on the school and district?
7. What did the school district do to help you transition into the position?
8. What are your thoughts on leading in a middle school setting?
9. Have you done anything special to prepare to lead a middle school?
10. What do you think the key components are to a strong middle school?

11. What characteristics do you think a principal needs to have in order to lead in a middle school?
12. What do you anticipate the first year will be like for you?
13. Do you have any big plans or initiatives you are going to work on this year?
14. How has the year gone so far?
15. Have there been any problems or difficulties so far?
16. Do you believe you have been prepared for this job?
17. Is there anything you wish you had been taught that would help you with the job?
18. Do you have any questions or concerns that I might help you with?

My first interview was with Karen. During this interview Karen and I spoke about her past professional experience, her Educational Leadership program, and her opening months as the middle school principal. Following this interview, I took the recorded interview and transcribed it into a written document. Once I had a transcribed version of the interview, I was able to start analyzing the data I had collected for possible themes that were unique to Karen's experience as the first year principal. This meant I synthesized the transcription into a readable story of Karen's experience as a first year middle school principal.

After completing these initial data collection process with Karen, I followed the same process with Marty and Susan. This meant, at the end of my first round of interviews, I had one separate data piece from each of my three respondents, and I could begin the first stage of the constant comparison analysis—open coding. Strauss and

Corbin (1998) describe that open coding is “like working on a puzzle” (p. 223). Using this approach, I read one transcribed interview and would highlight phrases and ideas that seemed important to the story of the principal. Next, I would compare this to the other transcribed stories and look for possible similarities or differences between the experiences of the three principals. Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2008) explain that “during this stage, the analyst is participating in coding the data, wherein the analyst chunks the data into smaller segments, and then attaches a descriptor, or ‘code’ for each segment” (p. 596).

This process continued throughout the duration of the year of data collection. I would enter an interview with a prepared set of questions. We would use these questions as a guide, but as the conversation took us in different directions, we would move freely back and forth following where the conversation led. After each interview, I would immediately transcribe the recorded data into a written document. Then I sent the written document back to the respondent via email so that they could “confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 4). If there were any changes, we discussed these at the following interview. Once I received verification from each principal regarding my interpretation of events, I would begin my analysis and interpretation of the data.

In the end, by using the constant comparison method, I was able to code each of the final transcribed stories in relationship to the research questions I developed at the start of my study. This is what Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to as “axial coding” (p.



143). Here the researcher groups the codes into similar categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Once I had all the transcribed narratives coded into similar categories, I moved into the last stage of the constant comparison method entitled selective coding. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define selective coding as “the process of integrating and refining the theory” (p. 143). During this time I began synthesizing the coded data into five thematic categories or theories that captured the main findings of this study. In the end of the constant comparison method, according to Strauss and Corbin (1998), the researcher can “create theory out of data” (p. 56).

Finally, I took the time to enlist the help of the respondents by using a member checking system to ensure that the interpretations and theories developed matched the thoughts and ideas of each respondent. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that member checks are “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314).

### Research Questions

How do beginning middle school administrators navigate through their first year of the principalship?

1. How prepared are first year middle school principals to lead at the middle level?
2. If first year middle school principals do face problems, what type of problems are these, and at what time of year do these problems occur?
3. Do first year middle school principals face problems specifically associated with the middle level setting?

4. Are there events that happen during the first year that discourage the first year middle school principal enough that he or she considers or decides to leave the position?
5. Are there events that happen during the first year that encourage the first year middle school principal enough that he or she considers staying in the position?

### Summary of Findings

In order to gain an understanding of the findings that were discovered in relationship to the research questions asked during this study, the three narratives are merged together. The results that follow present the findings within five thematic categories:

1. Educational leadership programs are not focusing on middle level education, so pre-service administrators have to depend on their own teaching and background experience as they start their first year of the middle school principalship.
2. For the first year middle school principal, problems are unavoidable and will happen.
3. Middle school principals must have current knowledge of middle school philosophy and concepts.
4. The most discouraging aspect of a middle school principalship is attempting to find balance between one's personal and professional life.
5. The middle school principalship is an ever changing and unpredictable job.

### Research Question 1 and Findings

How prepared are first year middle school principals to lead at the middle level?

Educational Leadership Programs are not focusing on middle level education, so pre-service administrators have to depend on their own teaching and background experience as they start their first year of the middle school principalship.

According to all three principals interviewed for this study, not one of their Educational Leadership programs discussed the principalship as it related to middle level education. When questioned whether she had any coursework specifically devoted to the middle level principalship during her program of study Susan simply stated, “Nope.” Marty believed her program of study did not prepare her for the role of the principal and “did nothing to address middle school administration.” Karen contended, “I was more prepared to lead in general, but not specifically at the middle school level. I think we have a tendency to forget the middle level in our preparatory programs so we didn’t have a whole lot of focus on the middle level.”

Since these Educational Leadership programs were not focusing on middle level education, each of these first year principals had to depend on their own teaching and background experience as they worked through their first year in educational administration. This is similar to the findings from an on-line survey of more than 1,400 middle level leaders that stated, “none of the principals involved indicated that they had majored in middle level education as undergraduates and only 7% held a master’s degree in middle level education” (Petzko et al., 2002, p. 5).

Because she taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade Reading and Language Arts for 17 years, coached extracurricular activities, earned a middle level endorsement during her first masters degree program, and helped lead many middle school initiatives at her former school, Susan demonstrated a sizable amount of teaching and background experience that helped her during her first year of administration at the middle level. In fact, Susan reflected on what her experience would have been like had she not had these experiences when she stated:

I've thought about that and cannot imagine, I can't imagine how somebody would, the difficulties or stresses or the, I just think it would be so much different for somebody that didn't have as much prior experience with this level. I mean not to mention all the little things and intricacies that you have to learn about just with the position, but then a new district that you belong to but then throw in the complexities of a middle school kid...how does anybody do it that doesn't really truly understand how a middle school functions or how middle school kids are?

Likewise, Karen also had many years of experience working with middle level students. Karen believed that because she worked with middle school students as a teacher and counselor for 21 years she was able to apply what she needed into her job as a first year middle school principal.

On the other hand, Marty brought minimal educational experience to her first year as the middle school principal. She did have experience working with adolescents as a Recreational Therapist and as a Federal Grant administrator, along with two years of teaching reading at the elementary level, but did not have any direct teaching experience with middle school-aged students. Due to this personal history, Marty lacked a strong background in the concepts of middle level education and the understanding of middle

level philosophy that would have served her well during her first year of the middle school principalship.

### Research Question 2 and Findings

If first year middle school principals do face problems, what type of problems are these, and at what time of year do these problems occur?

For the First Year Middle School Principal, Problems are Unavoidable and Will Happen.

The three first year middle school principals involved in this study did face problems during the entire year. Each of these respondents indicated that adjusting to the new principalship, managing the demands of time, dealing with managerial responsibilities, and maintaining balance were the major problems they collectively faced.

Adjusting to the new principalship. As the school year started the first major problem that occurred for all three individuals dealt with adjusting to the new position as principal. Daresh (1986) categorized this as “the socialization to the profession and the system” (p. 10). For Marty, who described herself as very proactive person, struggles developed as she had to react to many situations and decisions that had already been made prior to her joining the school district. Marty explained,

First and foremost when you come into a new role you have to be reactive because everything that’s been done has been done. You have had no input, no involvement, and no awareness and so you come in and every decision you make is reactive. That is a very difficult feeling to come to terms with if you’re a proactive person.

Similarly, Susan also described problems adjusting to her new role as principal. Susan disclosed,

When you've been in a situation for 17 years and you know every family and every kid and you know all the politics that go on in the school and you know where the paperclips are, you know everything. To come into, not just a new school, but a new state on top of it, it's been overwhelming.

Although Karen was hired into the principalship from within the district and had a deeper knowledge of district politics, policies, and procedures, and culture, she also spoke of problems that occurred for her as she transitioned into her new position. For example, Karen noted,

I think what would probably have helped me here, it was just kind of assumed that I knew the evaluation process because I had been through it (as a counselor) but what I found out was that we were missing some little pieces...I think it has taken me a long time to figure out what I am supposed to be doing and this is how I am supposed to write this up.

In addition to adjusting to the new principalship on a professional level, the three principals also experienced difficulties within their personal life. Both Susan and Karen mentioned that as they started into their new position, their husbands had to take on more of the responsibilities at home. Though they appreciated this help, they both felt guilty exchanging the responsibilities associated with being a parent for the responsibilities of being a principal.

Another area that stemmed from being new to the district was the change in relationships among colleagues. Each of the respondents discussed how difficult it was to lose the collegiality that goes along with being a part of a collective teaching staff to suddenly becoming part of the outsider group of the administrators. Marty acknowledged,

The position requires broad shoulders. It took me a few months, I would say, to come to terms with the fact that I won't have working relationships like I did before as a teacher. Where I was before, I worked very closely with all my

teachers that were my friends. You don't have those same kinds of relationships when you're in an administrative role. You learn that coming to school your role has shifted; that social piece is gone. You are strictly there for professional reasons now because unless you're friends with other administrators, typically that social element is something you might miss.

Likewise, Karen contemplated how her relationships would change with the teachers in the building soon after she was hired as the new principal. She said,

I think my biggest concern was now I have made this jump, how's the faculty going to accept me? Because I stayed in the same district, it wasn't like I was brand new to the people. I really thought I would be okay, as far as my faculty that I was friends with, but it was like, how are they going to take me now? I mean I am the one that's the supervisor.

This situation was only exacerbated during the first week of school when Karen described,

It was time for lunch and I was back here working or doing something to get things ready for later and they were gone. You know, it just kind of flew by them. I think...my husband joked and said, "Well okay this is it now, you've lost all your friends." It's true. I'm the outcast now.

The loss of friendships was understandable for Susan who moved to a completely new state to take her job, but Susan described how much she missed the relational aspect of being involved in middle school education at the start of the year.

As the principals moved into the month of September each principal dealt with problems that were unique to their own individual circumstances. Having moved into a very conservative community Susan explained,

I feel like this first year I've kind of got to go with the flow a little bit in order to see what the environment and the climate is around here. And what everybody expects. And how harsh discipline should be...so that part of being the "Newbie" has been...aw...it's frustrating.

For Marty the struggle became dealing with the culture and climate of her new school.

Marty reflected,

It was not a welcoming environment at all. And it turned out that the climate of our district, specifically in our middle school, had deteriorated to the point that it was almost toxic, very negative, a lot of mistrust, a lot of animosity towards administration. I did not know the environment was as it was when I was hired, so my little rosy picture of things was quickly shattered.

Throughout those first weeks of school Marty learned more and more about the reasons behind the negative atmosphere of the school. From this knowledge, she began to understand why her teachers had such animosity towards her. Marty explained,

When I arrived here at Concord Middle School there was a lot of disdain, as a nice way to put it, for administration, and rightfully so. They had gone through 13 administrators in 11 years across the district. I mean just rotating them in and out, almost to the point they were just forcing them out because they were just making life miserable.

In Karen's situation, even though she was hired to only be the middle school principal, shortly after she started into the job, her school district also assigned to be the middle school activities director. Karen responded to this duty by stating,

Well, I am one of those...I am not really good at saying 'no, I am not going to do it.' If something is given to me I will deal with it. I will do the absolute best that I can. I may not always be happy about it, but I am going to give it my all. 110% like I do everything else, and quite honestly, it was not...it was very overwhelming right away at the very beginning.

This additional assignment had a major impact on Karen's life. She spent her mornings fulfilling the obligations of being the principal, the afternoon fulfilling the obligations of the activities director, the evenings supervising all activities, and the nights trying to catch up on either area that had fallen behind during the day. There was not a lot of time left over for her family.



Managing the demands of time. By the time October rolled around each principal had experienced the second major problem: managing the demands of time. The principalship is a busy profession. Very quickly Susan, Marty, and Karen each discovered that her day-to-day schedule was constantly full. From the time they got to school to the many evenings of extracurricular supervision, these principals were busy trying to complete a multitude of assignments. The reality of this situation had Marty stating, “You know what? Nobody ever told me that as a middle school principal I was going to be spending so many nights supervising! That is something I didn’t know, but I learned very quickly!” Similarly, Susan described,

There have been a few days where I haven’t had a chance to have lunch. That part has been, sometimes I go you know when I was a teacher I used to get a half an hour to eat and I could sit down and digest and EAT food. Now, depending on the day, and how fast paced the day has been when I just kind of go sometimes it would be nice to go off in a corner and just eat my lunch.

From this busyness of the principalship, Karen reflected,

Sometimes I look back and think when I was a counselor I purposely set aside time to do reading and that was my individual development plan to do my reading. And I would focus each month on something so I knew I was searching out things. There’s no time to do any of that. That is probably one of the things I keep saying is why did I get into this? You know am I going to be as good as a leader as I can be without knowing all the research and knowing all that stuff in the magazines and so I am struggling with that part of it right now. And I don’t see an end to that for a little while.

On top of that, the amount of meetings and time out of the building amazed Susan, Marty, and Karen. Susan complained, “It’s been like one meeting after another, I mean the meetings never stop!” For these three principals meetings meant being out of the school building, so both instructional and managerial duties fell behind. Even though these meetings were for professional reasons and being gone was justifiable, the

deadlines for assigned work did not change accordingly. These deadlines stayed the same, so it became an overwhelming burden attempting to get everything done on time. These struggles described by Karen, Marty, and Susan can be attributed to what Daresh (1986) described as the need for “role clarification” (p. 7) by the beginning principal. Daresh (1986) contends that most principals “really did not know what the principalship was going to be like before they got into it” (p. 7). This lack of knowledge can cause a great deal of stress for the first year principal as he or she begins the year in the new position.

Dealing with managerial responsibilities. Following the much needed lull between supervising winter athletics and spring athletics, February and March brought about the third major problem faced by each of the principals: an increase in managerial responsibilities. Daresh (1986) notes, “if one single area of beginning administrator concern could be classified as most powerful, this area of a lack of technical expertise related to procedures was it” (p. 9). For Susan, Marty, and Karen this meant the beginning of formal evaluations of their teaching staff. With this task there was a huge increase in paperwork as each principal had to observe classroom teaching, meet face-to-face with teachers, and go through piles of teacher submitted artifacts. Karen explained her situation,

I just, you just get to this stage were you're overwhelmed...I have this stack of artifacts over here that I haven't even started on, and I keep saying I'll do it next week, I'll do it next weekend...I was talking to my mentor the other day and she said welcome to the principalship. This is the two months that are really really bad and I'm like, UGGGH, I thought that was January and February.

In Marty's case, she described how her district has a policy that each school building principal is supposed to evaluate his or her teachers once every three years. This is set up on a rotating basis. Because of this policy it just so happened to be the middle school principal's turn to evaluate all of the teachers in the building. Likewise, Susan's district had a policy that all evaluations had to be done by March 30<sup>th</sup>. This meant Susan felt a lot of pressure to complete all her formal evaluations on time.

Though each of the principals struggled with the paperwork and other managerial tasks associated with the teacher evaluation process, they each attempted to use this evaluation time to establish their own credibility, make positive changes, and build stronger relationships with their teachers. This extra work on Instructional Leadership had the effect of pushing each principal further and further behind on their Managerial Leadership. This created a high level of stress as work was delayed and offices became an on-going visual reminder filled with piles of unfinished work. Karen lamented,

It drives me nuts, absolutely drives me nuts to have my desk look like that right now and to know that these artifacts are hanging over me and you know I have done walkthroughs but haven't documented any walkthroughs this month.

During this time, Karen ran into further problems due to an unexpected technical problem with the school district's computer student management system.

The months of April and May continued to be heavily managerial-oriented. Along with teacher evaluations, preparation work began for the 2009-2010 school year. While each principal was being forced to look at the direction and needs of the school for the following year, each person was still trying to finish out the current year as best she could.

One area that each principal looked at during this time involved staffing. Due to statewide budget cuts to K-12 education and a decrease in projected student population for the 2009-2010 school year, Karen and Marty worked hard to find ways to keep their current teaching workforce and not have to make any reductions. While Marty was able to do this, Karen was forced to eliminate one teaching position in her building. Karen explained the impact that this was going to have on her middle school,

Middle school concept wise, depending on what schedule I end up with, you know I totally blow it out of the water with one of my schedules where I am going down to lunch shifts so the kids will be a mixed group in there instead of by grade level where they have their social time that I really like. One of my schedules I move my advisory to the very end of the day; I am not liking that very well, because I think we are going to lose some of that relationship time with some of those teachers and other adults in the building.

Susan, on the other hand, due to a growing tax base and an increase in student population was involved in the hiring of three new staff members. This was good news for the Darius school district, but created a problem for Susan in that her Educational Leadership program did not give her any training on the hiring process. From this situation, Susan felt completely unprepared about how to meet this challenge.

As staffing decisions were made, Susan, Marty, and Karen started working on the Master Schedule for the next year. Because Susan had an increase in teachers and Marty was able to maintain her teacher workforce, the two felt happy about the addition of new class sections and offerings for their students. However, because of the decrease in staffing, Karen had to make some undesirable changes to her middle school overall.

Along with this situation, Karen had to deal with a major theft situation that occurred at school. In the course of two weeks, many students had their iPods stolen out

of their lockers. To help resolve this situation, Karen worked with local law enforcement to finalize the investigation and move towards natural consequences for those involved.

When the month of May arrived, each of the principals could see a light at the end of the tunnel. However, each person was dealing with the demands of time and attending more meetings than ever. Marty explained,

It's IEP meetings, and schedule meetings, and staffing meetings, and professional development meetings, and parent meetings, and just ALL the meetings...I am almost dreading the next few weeks because of so many meetings.

Likewise, Karen also was feeling stress related to an increase in meetings at the end of the year. She stated, "It just seemed like some Wednesday nights I probably had free but other than that, even through weekends, it was just crazy...I was amazed at the number of meetings that were piled in at the end."

In addition to being inundated with meetings, Susan and Marty noted a let down in behavior among students and staff. Susan dealt with a very violent fight among students on the second to last day of school, and Marty dealt with her teachers not following proper procedures related to student supervision on the second to last day of school.

Maintaining balance. The problem of trying to complete work that was heavily managerial-oriented created the fourth major problem for these principals—maintaining balance. As life got busy at work, life at home followed suit. At one point in the year, Karen complained, "I was here constantly four or five nights a week trying to get everything done and now I am like I really need to be home a little bit, my house is showing that and my husband is saying that."

Marty explained that she had to have ongoing conversations with her family because they were frustrated with her spending so much time at work. Marty told them,

Well, this is how my day looks when I go in. This is what I think I am going to do, and these are the meetings I have. And then, you get a flood of referrals, and a flood of questions that you need to address immediately. So all those things that you set aside to do today now have been pushed off, but the deadlines are still there, you still have to do it all.

Susan had the toughest time dealing with the issues surrounding time management and maintaining balance, especially, in her opinion, as a mother. Susan described her feelings about the principalship related to time,

I can see why females are not in this position...It's just because there are so many nights where that I am here for a meeting or I've got paperwork that I need to do and many times I'll get the kids to bed and then I'll come back here until 9:30-10:00 p.m...It's...mom's...you know...being a mom, it's a little different than being a dad. In a way...that part of it...the time that's involved, and maybe because it's the first year, I don't know...I think it can be hectic at times.

Susan went on to describe,

I understand in these first couple of years it's going to be very much like being a first year teacher and basically my life is just going to revolve around this. So I have told the kids to just be patient that this is mom's first year and things will get better.

For Susan these problems, both in and out of the school setting, were tough to keep under control. With the pressure of increasing standardized test scores, Susan focused a large amount of time during school hours on improving student achievement. Outside of school hours, Susan struggled with the realization that her job as the principal never stops, especially as she tried to meet the norms and expectations of her community. For example, Susan discovered how some community members felt about the principal drinking alcohol after she attended a Super Bowl party. From this new understanding

Susan disclosed, "If I want a bottle of wine I don't go to Wal-Mart anymore, my husband does that instead."

While Karen also spent time attempting to increase standardized test scores, she found herself in the role of mediator dealing with conflict between teachers, and with teachers involved in negotiating their union contract with the School Board and Superintendent. Marty, on the other hand, at the direction of her Superintendent was not focusing her attention on standardized tests. Rather, she was struggling with the frustration of her own personal health and wellness. Marty explained how she was getting "considerably less sleep and exercise since starting the job." Marty disclosed,

I mean there are days when I think I am not sure if this is worth it. I feel like it detracts so much personally and with my health. I just worry about that. I just can't foresee myself doing this for 10 years, but it will only be because I am ready to move on to the next thing, not because I can't wait to get away from being a principal.

While Marty indicated health and wellness concerns early in the semester, Susan and Karen both spoke to their own personal health and wellness at the end of the year.

According to Susan,

I have gained five to seven pounds this year, and I've been trying to decide why? I work out diligently three to four times a week, running and weights, and this was a great stress reliever at 5:30 in the morning. But I wasn't able to keep it (weight) off. I chalk it up to the sitting in meetings, in my office, during parent visits. I just don't think that a principal has the ability to be as mobile as a teacher. I go from sitting in my office to sitting in a classroom observing teachers. I didn't have any other health issues. I am sure my blood pressure was out of this world a couple of times!

Similarly, Karen gained about seven pounds throughout the year; however, she believes this happened because she took the whole winter off from exercising due to time constraints at work. In her attempt to find balance between work and home, Karen

lamented, “I feel guilty when I get home; I am not going to go for a walk or exercise, I want to be with my kids, you know, but I’m terrible, I’m terrible about guilt that way. I always have been.”

Finally, each principal noted that the last week of school was an incredibly busy time. Karen mentioned staying up all night for many nights trying to finish her summative teacher evaluations, preparing for an end-of-the-year celebration she was hosting, and planning for her upcoming family vacation. This had Karen commenting, “I was really, I was absolutely exhausted the day of check out.” Susan also spent time planning and organizing for an end-of-the-year celebration with her staff. And while Marty did not have an end-of-the-year celebration with her staff, she commented on feeling very worn down by the end of the last week.

### Research Question 3 and Findings

Do first year middle school principals face problems specifically associated with the middle level setting?

Middle School Principals Must Have Current Knowledge of Middle School Philosophy and Concepts

In order to have the greatest chance of success at the middle school level a principal must understand the developmental stages that students are going through during the ages of 10-14. According to George, Stevenson, Thomason, and Beane (1992), “Effective middle school leaders possess a clear understanding of the characteristics and needs of young adolescents and consistently translate that understanding into a vision of an appropriately organized and effective middle school program” (p. 111). Once



principals have this knowledge, they must work to ensure that their school is developmentally responsive to the cognitive, physical, and social/emotional changes that are occurring for each student in the building. Even though there were differences in the levels of knowledge related to middle school philosophy among the three principals in this study, each person made attempts to lead their school with a middle school perspective. By choosing to lead this way, four major problem areas did develop. These included the areas of culture and climate of the school, organization of existing structures, work with teachers, and work with students.

Culture and climate of the school. As new principals, Karen, Marty, and Susan each faced problems as they attempted to improve the overall culture and climate of their schools. With the attempt to create a school that is developmentally responsive to the specific needs of young adolescents, the middle school becomes a unique place in education. However, the middle school's uniqueness comes not from courses, groupings, and schedules, but also from attitudes, perceptions, and sensitivity of the principals and teachers who educate these preadolescents (Wellner et al., 1987). Prior to becoming the middle school principal, Karen spent 11 years as a counselor working under the direction of a "big, burly, football player principal." According to Karen, this principal created a culture of fear and intimidation within the school. In Karen's mind, this type of culture was exactly opposite to that of a true middle school. As a person knowledgeable about middle school philosophy, Karen was excited about "being able to kind of open that climate up and bring in a lot more of the 'Character Counts' and...just change that feeling and get that culture as more of a community." From this decision to move into a

more open, student-centered environment, Karen met with resistance from multiple teachers who had been successful and rewarded under the former “good old boy” culture and traditional junior high environment.

Similarly, Marty encountered resistance as she attempted to improve the culture at her school. When she entered the middle school there was a very “toxic culture” based upon the constant turnover of administrative leadership. To overcome this harsh reality, Marty set out to concentrate on building positive, collaborative, respectful relationships with her teachers. Marty explained one of her strategies, “I have tried building a little more fun into the day. We have scheduled fun activities every month; that’s made a big difference.” She hoped this would then trickle down to the relationships between teachers and students. In addition, Marty hired a new secretary who she “felt would help to improve morale and be good for kids.”

Although Susan entered a situation that had an established middle school culture and climate, she still worked hard to improve what was already in place. According to Susan, the most important characteristics of a middle school are “cooperation and teaming.” Susan explained, “Middle school is all about relationships. Content, academics really is second. I mean middle schoolers so desire wanting to interact and have conversations and moreso than a high school situation.”

With this belief, Susan worked with her leadership team and other teachers to add a number of community building activities to the year. For example, during ITBS time, the teachers and the students gathered in the gymnasium and did some fun calisthenics and dance moves each morning before the test started. Another example happened in the

spring when Susan developed a school wide March Madness basketball tournament. This activity had students and teachers participating in a basketball tournament against each other in order to build a stronger community of learners. A final example happened at the end of each month when Susan led her students and teachers in a celebration assembly honoring students for their hard work and effort.

Though there was minimal overall resistance to these activities, there were some teachers that did think they were taking away from instructional time. However, Susan believed the main reason for these activities was to help ensure a positive relationship among administrators, teachers, staff, and students.

Organization of existing structures. The second major problem area associated with administering at the middle school level came with organizing certain aspects of the school according to middle school philosophy. According to Wiles and Bondi (2001), "It becomes the purpose of the middle school to offer a balanced, comprehensive, success-oriented curriculum that is designed to bridge the gap between the self-contained environment of the elementary school and the departmentalized structure of the high school. It is also intended to provide experiences that will assist students in making the transition from late childhood to adolescence" (p. 127).

At the start of the year, after meeting with each teacher individually, Marty realized, "When I first started here, it became very clear through conversations; I met with every single teacher, kind of went through what's working, what's not working spiel, and consistently I heard our Seminar, our advisor-advisee program was the pits." With this knowledge, Marty decided to lead her teachers into a complete restructuring of

their middle school advisory program. This decision prioritized resources to this cornerstone of middle school education and away from other areas within the school.

Although Karen did not have to restructure her school's advisory program, she did feel that it was an important aspect to the success of their middle school. With this belief, Karen chose to personally lead an 8<sup>th</sup> grade advisory group for 20 minutes each day. By dedicating this time each day to the advisory program, Karen was forced to adjust her schedule in order to meet this commitment.

Another organizational struggle occurred for these principals as they worked with staffing concerns. As Susan worked to hire three new staff members she intentionally sought out individuals who would not only be strong academic teachers, but who would also be good for kids. Although Marty and Karen did not have the luxury of hiring new staff members, they both worked very hard to maintain or avoid losing strong middle school teachers as budget cuts called for a reduction in staff. Karen explained,

When we were doing our staff changes, we talked about who we would move to the elementary that is elementary endorsed, and I kept saying well the person that they wanted to move, I said he is not really an elementary, he is certified elementary, but he is so much better at the middle school level.

A final area of organization impacted by a middle school perspective came for Susan as she looked at her master schedule. After a year of experiencing "Blocked Scheduling," Susan contemplated switching to a more traditional master schedule based on regular periods of time. In her opinion, a number of difficult situations occurred because of the blocked scheduling. For example, when a class had to be canceled due to weather or a guest speaker came to the school, the impact on the overall schedule was felt

by all the teachers. However, at the end of the year, Susan decided to keep the blocked schedule. Susan explained,

When you look at what the teachers are going to be able to do with kids when you look at that block and the relationships and the projects and the things that they can do that they are really what middle schoolers need. Having that interaction all the time. It's what makes sense.

Working with teachers. A third problem area associated with middle level leadership developed as Karen, Marty, and Susan worked with teachers throughout the year. According to George (2002), "while it is the classroom teacher who directly affects student achievement, it is the principal who provides teachers with the necessary support to create a high-performing middle grades school" (as cited in Thompson, 2004, p. 25). As she started on her informal classroom observations and formal teacher evaluations at the beginning of the year, Susan believed her teachers were judging her credibility as a middle school principal. Fortunately, because of her extensive experience and background in middle school education, Susan noted,

When I do suggest things, I think they take it with a real appreciation...I can tell that they're thinking I do know what I'm talking about versus oh yeah, maybe I'll try that, maybe I won't.

Karen also mentioned that evaluations were a tough component of being a middle school principal. Whether the evaluations were informal walkthroughs or formal one-on-one meetings, Karen always looked to make sure her teachers were implementing a student-centered approach that matched the training they had received during their professional development time. However, Karen mentioned that because she had prior experience as a middle school teacher and counselor when she started evaluations this process did go well. Karen said,

I am about halfway through my evaluations right now so I am feeling much better about that now. I have a much better handle on things. It's been interesting to have the teachers process through things like, "Oh this isn't the way it was last time" or and I said I want the evaluation to be a positive thing this is how we're both going to grow. And so each evaluation I have done so far has been very very positive which is good.

Marty, on the other hand, did not have experience teaching at the middle level so she was forced to work with the school's At-Risk coordinator and do her own study of student developmental needs in order to fairly evaluate her staff based on middle school concepts. This did make evaluations more challenging as a whole.

Along with ensuring that high quality teaching based on middle school philosophy and concepts was happening in the classroom, Susan, Marty, and Karen also encouraged each teacher to develop a strong understanding of student development as they looked at district-wide initiatives and other teacher professional development training.

At the time of this study, the Iowa Department of Education was initiating the use of the Iowa Core Curriculum for each school district. Because of this, Susan, Marty, and Karen were heavily involved in planning how this curriculum would impact the day-to-day operations of their school. They were spending a great deal of time making sure their teachers looked closely at their own curriculum, and how it is mapped out and aligned vertically and horizontally with the other teachers in the building.

However, at the middle school level, Susan, Marty, and Karen had to make sure that the scope and sequence of the curriculum appropriately met the developmental needs of the students in the building. Because Susan and Karen compiled many years of experience working with and teaching middle school aged students, they felt confident in

their abilities to lead the curriculum mapping of the school. Marty, because of her lack of teaching experience, had to spend time working to build trust and credibility with her teachers. This was not only as a principal with the appropriate leadership skills and knowledge, but also as a principal who was going to stay around for more than one or two years. To accomplish this, Marty worked to engage her teachers in a study of the cognitive development of adolescents. Marty hoped this would give her teachers a better understanding and appreciation of why middle school students act the way they do and if they are “expecting kids to do things that their brains are not ready for.”

Working with students. The last major problem area associated with middle level leadership for these three new principals dealt with the work they did with students. According to Elias (2001) “the changes brought on by puberty combine with cognitive and social development changes to make middle school transition a complex situation” (p. 20).

In order to be proactive with discipline and build a positive, caring image with the student body, each principal spent a great deal of time and energy engaging in events where they could communicate directly with their students. They believed that because there are so many dramatic changes that take place within the social/emotional development of middle school students, it is the principal’s responsibility to build positive relationships with students.

To accomplish this, Susan, Marty, and Karen intentionally devoted time each day to direct communication with students. For example, during the school day, each principal spent time before the start of school talking to kids in the hallways. Once

school started, the principals made an attempt to talk with students during classroom walkthroughs. Finally, at the end of the day, each principal viewed extracurricular supervision as an opportunity to talk with kids at the game or have talking points for the next day's conversations. Susan stated, "Middle school is all about relationships." It was her belief that even though it took a significant amount of time, talking directly with students was important for the work she did as a middle school principal.

Marty agreed and even allocated time to go down to the elementary school to work with 4<sup>th</sup> graders who would be her students the following year. According to Marty, "Building positive relationships with students was the biggest thing I do." Likewise, Karen even went to the point of leading a 20-minute advisory section each day with some of the tougher 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. In addition, she also supervised the lunchroom each day in order to have the chance to talk with students.

Unfortunately, because of the extreme variance in the social/emotional development of middle school students, challenges did arise for Susan, Marty, and Karen. Marty indicated that students would come to her office to talk about the many difficulties they were having with their "home-life, friends, or whatever." According to Marty, because of the incredible social/emotional developmental change that is happening for these students, the most difficult issue for her to deal with was what she called "Girl Drama." Marty explained, "Girl Drama at the middle level is unbelievable...I don't have the skills to help them work through what they need to work through." In addition, Marty emphasized,

The things kids get in trouble for are much more significant than what you might imagine. Things like running away, drugs, bullying and harassment...I mean if I



didn't have the opportunity to work with one of the best people in the state about that I wouldn't have a clue.

Karen and Susan also indicated that there was an increase in the degree of trouble students got into as they moved from elementary school to middle school. Many of these events seem to happen as students began to question their identity and look for acceptance from their peer groups instead of their parents. During the third quarter of the school year, Karen found herself dealing with a major theft problem at school. Karen admitted,

I was kind of waiting for this bomb to drop and, unfortunately, I have some parents who are not very good supervisors of their kids and they have gotten into quite a bit of trouble, and I think there's going to be more trouble coming down...But it is the same group of kids and it is sad to see that some of these kids are going down that road and it's hard to have them here, we're not used to that here.

A similar experience, on the second to last day of school, happened for Susan. In one of the hallways of school, a major fight broke out between two boys. After completing her investigation of the situation, Susan came to see that the reasons for the fight centered on the bullying and harassment of a young boy by a more "popular" group of boys.

Because of their knowledge about middle school development, Karen and Susan each believed they were able to deal with these disciplinary situations in an appropriate manner based on the developmental needs of their students.

#### Research Question 4 and Findings

Are there events that happen during the first year that discourage the first year middle school principal enough that he or she considers or decides to leave the position?

## The Most Discouraging Aspect of a Middle School Principalsip is Attempting to Find Balance Between One's Personal and Professional Life

Though many challenges were presented to Susan, Marty, and Karen throughout the school year, the one challenge that was perceived as “most discouraging” dealt with attempting to balance the demands of the principalsip with the demands of personal life. After only having the responsibilities of a classroom teacher or school counselor prior to become a principal, Susan, Marty, and Karen struggled taking on the multitude of responsibilities associated with being the principal of an entire school.

Overall, Susan had a very good year. She enjoyed her job and received great satisfaction as the new principal at DMS. However, throughout her year Susan commented about how difficult the transition from teacher to principal was for her as a mother. Susan explained,

I can see why females are not in this position...It's just because there are so many nights where I am here for a meeting or I've got paperwork that I need to do and many times I'll get the kids to bed and then I'll come back here until 9:30-10:00 p.m...It's...mom's...you know...being a mom, it's a little different than being a dad.

Susan described how hard it was for her to move her kids from the farm, where they were used to a lot of freedom and had established friendships, to Darius where they lived in town and did not know a single person. On top of this, as the new middle school principal, Susan was forced to be at school for long periods of time and could not meet her kids as they got off the bus like she had done when she was a teacher. This caused a lot of guilt and conflict for Susan. She explained,

I understand in these first couple of years it's going to be very much like being a first year teacher and basically my life is just going to revolve around this. So I

have told the kids to just be patient, that this is mom's first year and things will get better.

Although Karen was very busy fulfilling the role as principal, she also had the extra duties related to being the middle school activities director at Austin-Brownsville. Throughout the year, the combination of both roles was a huge struggle for Karen as she worked to maintain balance between her professional life and personal life. Karen discussed this struggle as she contemplated her own health and wellness over the course of the school year. As she attempted to emphasize the impact the lack of exercise was having on her health and life, Karen made strong inferences to the negative impact being away from home so much was having on her internally as a mother. Karen stated, "I feel guilty when I get home. I am not going to go for a walk or exercise. I want to be with my kids, you know, but I'm terrible, I'm terrible about guilt that way. I always have been."

Even though Marty did not have children she still struggled with balancing her professional life and her personal life. Because of the incredibly negative environment she walked into, Marty believed she had to spent a great deal of time at work trying to create a collaborative, respectful environment with her teachers. This imbalance of time, as she worked during the day, at nights, and on weekends, created guilt in her because of the frustration her family was having towards her and the choice to work so much. Marty explained, "It is a balancing act between all the professional duties you have, but also personally trying to do what is good for you. It's very difficult and challenging."

Another area of concern related to balance for all three principals dealt with the stress the principalship was having on their own personal health and wellness. In talking about past behavior in terms of exercise and fitness, Susan, Marty, and Karen each

characterized themselves as being avid exercisers. They all said that prior to the principalship they would exercise at least four to five times per week. This would include walking, running, and/or weightlifting. Unfortunately, since starting the principalship, only Susan could state, "I work out diligently three to four times a week, running and weights, and this was a great stress reliever at 5:30 in the morning."

Besides exercising, Karen tried to reduce stress by carving out a quiet personal time as she made dinner each night for her family. Karen explained that she would listen to soft, relaxing piano music or what her kids called, "Mom's depressing music." This plan carried over to her office area, too. During the third quarter of school Karen added two plants, a small bubbling fountain, and a stack of relaxation CDs to her office. Karen explained she did this because she was spending more time at work than at home.

A final note on the struggle with balance was that after the entire year of administrative experience, Susan, Marty, and Karen each gave the advice to pre-service administrators to make sure to maintain proper balance between the professional and personal sides of life. Susan advised, "Try to leave certain situations at school and don't take them home. Try to make sure you have time for your family." Karen said, "Find something for your own mental health. Find time for yourself. Don't overbook yourself by taking on other positions." Finally, Marty expressed, "Take some time for yourself. Stay balanced from the beginning. It is so difficult, but I think you do a service to everyone else if you do that."

### Research Question 5 and Findings

Are there events that happen during the first year that encourage the first year middle school principal enough that he or she considers staying in the position?

The Middle School Principalship is an Ever Changing and Unpredictable Job

According to Susan, Marty, and Karen, the middle school principalship is an ever changing and unpredictable job. This was an encouraging aspect to the job that helped each principal decide to continue in the position for at least one more year. Because of the fact that the kids are changing so quickly, the principal must change, too. One minute the principal must work with a 5<sup>th</sup> grader who still needs the nurturing of an elementary student, and the next minute the principal must work with an 8<sup>th</sup> grader who wants to be completely independent from any adult figure in his or her life. This unpredictability makes the middle school principalship a unique setting for a person attempting to lead a school. In describing her life as a middle school principal Karen explained, "It is exciting and invigorating. Never once is the list of things I come into accomplish, accomplished. It is just a constant movement, constant excitement, and just fun. I really just love it."

Likewise, Marty described her life as a middle school principal by stating,

It's kind of like an adventure because everyday I come in thinking I'm going to do something and it never turns out that way. My day is totally different everyday than what I think it is going to be like, and I like that. I am never bored. I am always challenged. I am always on the go.

As she reflected on the year, Susan concurred with the unpredictable nature of the middle school principalship. Susan explained,

I really feel as a first year administrator you are really in a survival mode the whole first year, just surviving what new things pop up, the programs that are in place, the different things that just comprise the school day.

In addition, Susan, like Karen and Marty, indicated that she was very much enjoying the job because it gave her a different challenge each and every day.

Along with the ever changing responsibilities of the principalship came the joy of working with ever changing students. Susan displayed such enthusiasm as she told the story of wearing the “Zebra” clothes with the two 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls. This joyful feeling continued for Susan as the year went on. Susan explained,

I think the relationships I am forming with them, that was hard for me coming in, cause I had relationships and to start off basically at ground zero, I think that was frustrating for me because I enjoy middle school kids so much and I wasn’t able, that wasn’t there yet, and I feel like now it is.

With the encouraging aspect of working with preadolescent students, Susan told the story about the “March Madness” basketball tournament. During her description, Susan just beamed as she enthusiastically explained, “It was awesome! It was so much fun!”

Karen echoed Susan’s enthusiasm when she spoke of the opportunity to lead middle school students on a daily basis. Karen explained, “It is just fun. I think a big part is just being with the kids.” Karen also glowed when she described the pleasure she experienced helping organize for the annual middle school musical performance. Karen happily described,

We had a wonderful musical that included 90 kids. I mean the performance was just terrific and I think that was huge. We brought the 5<sup>th</sup> graders up and I allowed the kids to watch who were not involved. Total difference in the kids. I mean they absolutely were mesmerized by it. It was really neat for them to see what their peers were doing.

The overall encouragement Karen received from working with middle school students could be seen in her description of her life as a middle school principal. Karen explained,

There's something about these kids that just keep you going...this is just a fun level that just, wow, there is just constant movement, constant excitement...besides excitement and just the craziness most days, I would describe it as fun. I mean just, I don't know too many jobs that you can go to and see, I have 194 kids and 194 different personalities and be able to talk with them and just relate to them and I guess that is probably a big part of it, just fun.

Even Marty, who had the least experience working with middle school-aged students, still described a joy that developed from being around her kids each and every day. Marty explained,

I think one of the things that I always feel good about is when I have a student who comes in and says, "Hey, I want to check my grades with you" or "I just want to tell you something that happened that is really awesome. That is when I know I am in it for the right reasons. It's just those little student conversations that are positive and unexpected.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONNECTIONS TO THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND FUTURE STUDIES

#### Introduction

The purpose of the first section of this chapter is to identify specific connections from this study to those found in the Body of Knowledge. The second section of this chapter is to make recommendations for professional practice that address the findings developed from this study. These recommendations are intended for a wide audience in the hopes of improving the middle level principalship. Finally, the third section of this chapter is to highlight future studies needed to bring clarity to the body of knowledge surrounding the middle level principalship.

#### Connections to the Body of Knowledge

##### Connections to National and Iowa State Standards

The ELCC identifies seven standards for school leaders:

1. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.
2. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
3. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
4. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.



5. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.
6. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.
7. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by substantial, sustained, standards-based experiences in real settings that are planned and guided cooperatively by university and school district personnel for graduate credit. (Wilmore, 2002, pp. 13-14)

In addition, in the state of Iowa, the Iowa Department of Education, drawing heavily from the national standards presented by the ELCC, produced its state standards for school leaders. These six standards are:

1. An educational leader promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community. (Shared Vision)
2. An educational leader promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional development. (Culture of Learning)
3. An educational leader promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. (Management)
4. An educational leader promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests, and needs and mobilizing community resources. (Family and Community)
5. An educational leader promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner. (Ethics)
6. An educational leader promotes the success of all students by understanding the profile of the community and responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context. (Societal Context; IDOE, 2008, p.1)

When comparing the results from this study to these national and Iowa state standards for school leaders, it is easy to see that improvement must be made in the professional development of middle level principals. If, as Standard One describes in both the national and Iowa standards for school leadership, the principal must be the main person to promote the shared vision of the school, then the first year principal must have a strong understanding of the middle school concept that helps shape the middle school setting as he or she begins the position. By not having any direct instruction in middle level leadership during their Educational Leadership program, the three principals in this study were left to their own background experience and personal knowledge to guide them as they attempted to meet this standard of excellence.

This same situation arose as the principals in this study attempted to meet Standard Two of the national and Iowa standards: Building a Culture of Learning. Without direct training and instruction for the adoption and implementation of professionally accepted middle school concepts during their Educational Leadership programs, the principals in this study were left to their own background experience and personal knowledge as they worked to improve the educational experience for both middle school students and middle school teachers.

Without proper training in middle school concepts during the Educational Leadership program, pre-service administrators who do not have background experience with middle level education will struggle becoming effective Instructional Leaders of a middle school. Principals starting their first year in the middle school principalship will have great difficulty meeting the national and state standards for their profession.

### Connections to Daresh's Study

When reflecting upon the results from this study, it became clear that the more time spent in a teaching role and the more opportunities to take on leadership roles during that teaching time, the more comfortable each individual was as a principal. Because of this finding there was an impact to the three broad themes presented by Daresh (1986):

1. Role clarification.
2. Limitations on technical expertise (procedural/mechanical or interpersonal).
3. Difficulties experienced with socialization to the profession and to the particular school system. (p. 5)

Role clarification. According to Daresh (1986), role clarification relates to the principal's perception that "they really did not know what the principalship was going to be like before they got into it" (p. 7). When looking at the area of role clarification, Marty had serious difficulties. Because of her limited experience as a teacher, Marty admittedly did not know what the day-to-day job of the principal entailed. Further, she did not understand the level of counseling skill she would need to have when working with kids. Finally, Marty did not realize that as a middle school principal she would be required to supervise extracurricular duties.

While Marty had major difficulties with role clarification, Susan and Karen had an easier transition. In Susan's case, she taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts for 17 years. During this time Susan had the opportunity to take on many leadership roles and bring many new educational initiatives to her school. By having the chance to lead others during Curriculum Mapping and the Advisory Program, Susan had many opportunities to

experience certain elements of the principalship. Likewise, Karen had multiple chances to experience hands-on leadership opportunities. As a teacher and counselor for 21 years, Karen had great exposure to the role of the principal. Further, having been the counselor in the same district she was hired into as the principal, Karen had already been assigned many duties she would have to do as the principal. This was only enhanced when the superintendent started grooming her for the position after he hired Karen during March of the previous school year.

However, each of the principals noted how the number of meetings they had to attend as a principal was certainly a surprise. At each interview throughout the year Susan, Marty, and Karen made strong remarks about how they were shocked by how many meetings they had to attend as the principal. This was something they were ignorant about as they entered the role of the principal.

Limitations on technical expertise. Limitations on technical expertise relates to the principals “feeling unprepared to effectively deal with two areas: (a) procedural or mechanical issues, and (b) interpersonal skills” (p. 8).

*Procedural or mechanical issues.* By procedural or mechanical issues, the principals in Daresh’s (1986) study were referring to the problems they were having with the day-to-day operations of running a school, for example, how to read district reports, how to budget time and resources effectively, and how to lead mandated school initiatives.

Having worked in the same district as the school counselor for so many years prior to becoming the principal, Karen did not have many problems related to limitations

on technical expertise. The only area that Karen mentioned had to deal with the superintendent assuming she understood the evaluation process completely since she had gone through the process as a counselor. As Karen worked to evaluate her teachers, she wished she had a better understanding of how to accomplish this task more efficiently.

Susan, on the other hand, being new to the district and state of Iowa, really struggled with understanding the day-to-day operations of the school. It took her awhile to understand simple things such as where the paperclips were located as well as more complex issues such as how to report data results and findings at school board meetings. In addition, Susan also struggled with how to organize her office and filing systems. Because she was new to the district and was unsure about many rules and policies, Susan worried about making mistakes that would impact her job as the instructional leader. For example, Susan almost missed the due date for her students to take an out-of-state field trip. Had she not gotten the field trip put on the agenda for the monthly school board meeting, her students would not have been able to take part in a great experiential learning program.

Similarly, Marty was also ignorant about her district rules related to the evaluation process of teachers. At the start of the fourth quarter of school, Marty discovered that her district had a rotating system of evaluation between each of the school buildings and that it was the middle school principal's year to evaluate each of their teachers. Due to a lack of knowledge about the district policy, Marty was forced to work longer hours to meet this requirement.

*Interpersonal skills.* This relates to both talking and listening to others in order to get things accomplished. Daresh (1986) notes that beginning principals experience many problems related to interpersonal skills, for example, problems related to conflict management, relationships between the school and the outside community, and different worries expressed by teachers.

In the area of interpersonal skills, as it relates to the principalship, each of the three principals felt very confident in their abilities to communicate both orally and written to the stakeholders in the school district. However, Marty did note how much she was enjoying and benefiting from the professional development training she received entitled, “Fierce Conversations.”

Socialization to the system. Socialization to the system relates to internalizing and accepting the principal’s leadership role within the school district, the community, and the profession. Many new administrators have concerns during their first years with properly portraying themselves in the role of principal (Daresh, 1986).

As a new principal in a new district and state, it took Susan a few months to socialize to the district. Susan commented on feeling like the “Newbie” at the start of the year. There were times Susan wanted to voice her opinions to her boss, other administrators, and her teachers, but believed she needed to hold back so she did not appear to be egotistical and all knowing. In addition, Susan struggled with finding her place as the disciplinarian at school. At the beginning of the school year, Susan had to take time to comprehend the expectations of the superintendent, guidance counselor, and teachers in regards to know how much discipline to dole out on any given situation.

Susan admitted that a great help in this process was a professional diary that had been left by the previous principal. This journal detailed what consequences had been given out for certain infractions. From this notebook, Susan was able to determine if she was being too harsh or too lenient in her punishments.

As Marty began her first year as the principal, she struggled with the idea of needing to be reactive rather than proactive. Since most of the major decisions on the school year had been made the spring and summer before the start of the school year, Marty felt like she could not make any major changes during the school year. In addition, because Marty found herself in such a negative and difficult situation, she always felt like she had to be upbeat and positive. As the new principal in a school system that had such a turbulent history with educational administrators, Marty believed she was not allowed to be less than perfect in the eyes of her stakeholders.

Having been hired as the new middle school principal into the same district that she had worked in previously, Karen did not have too much trouble socializing into the district. From her first hand knowledge and experience working with the intimidating style of leadership presented by the previous principal, Karen believed that she would have to depend on her own personality and collaborative style of leadership when working with others. As she implemented her own leadership style she worried if the teachers and others would accept her in her new role as supervisor and leader. There was even a school board member who expressed concern whether Karen would be strong enough to maintain appropriate discipline at school. However, as the school year went on, Karen proved she was able to lead the school using a more collaborative/relational

approach to leadership. At the end of the year, at the county fair, the school board member who had concerns gave Karen a nice compliment validating her year in the role of principal.

### Connections to Sparks-Norris Study

In the study, “Naming the principalship: The first year,” Sparks-Norris (1997) conducted an autobiographical case study of her first year as a middle school principal. From the data gathered, Sparks-Norris formulated the following themes involving her first year as a principal.

1. A principal becomes a principal by being a principal.
2. An administrator brings to the principalship all prior experiences.
3. People problems create the greatest time demands for principals.
4. It is important for principals to work within the parameters of the local school and district.
5. The desire to be the curricular leader is evident early in the principalship. (p. 89)

A principal becomes a principal by being a principal. Throughout the first year, Sparks-Norris discovered that even though she completed an educational administration degree, acquired professional development training in leadership, and obtained leadership experience as a teacher, nothing truly prepared her for the principalship except taking on all the duties and responsibilities associated with the job.

As Susan, Marty, and Karen looked at the first year of administration, they each used the word “survival” to describe their experience going through the year, especially



during the first semester. Because there were so many new challenges and difficulties that kept coming up, each principal acknowledged that until someone is in the role of the principal there is nothing that can really prepare the person for the experience. Karen described this time as a “baptism by fire,” and Susan agreed saying, “you almost have to jump in feet first and just do the job.”

An administrator brings to the principalship all prior experiences. Sparks-Norris (1997) explained that she brought all the individual moments she had experienced as a human to her first year of administration. These were both personal experiences and professional experiences as a career educator. It was these life experiences that she drew upon as she worked through her first year as the principal.

Whereas Sparks-Norris described not only the professional experiences she brought to the principalship, but also her experiences as a daughter, mother, and wife, Susan, Marty, and Karen focused in on the professional experiences they each had that they brought to their first year of the principalship. Susan gave many examples of her 17 years as a 6<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts teacher, athletic coach, and leadership opportunities that she brought to the principalship. Karen told of her years as a vocal music teacher and counselor in describing the experiences she brought to the principalship. Even though Marty did not have the great numbers of years with direct teaching experience, she did bring to the principalship her experience as a Recreational Therapist, mental health field worker with adolescents, and federal grant administrator focusing on needy adolescents.

People problems create the greatest time demands for principals. As she reflected on her job as a principal, Sparks-Norris (1997) explained that learning how to lead difficult people and to hire qualified employees was a very difficult task for her. In her opinion, Sparks-Norris indicated that she had never received any training on the interpersonal skills needed for the role of principal.

Overall, of the three principals, Marty had the greatest struggle with people problems. For much of Marty's first year as a middle school principal, she dealt with disgruntled teachers and parents. Due to the incredible negativity that was displayed so often by adults, Marty had to spend a huge amount of time working to build trust, respect, collaborative relationships, and a positive climate at her school. Karen, who also made it a goal to work on changing the climate and culture of the school, did not have to spend as much time on people problems during her first year. Instead, Karen focused much of her attention on managerial tasks, paperwork, and her role as Activities Director. Likewise, Susan entered a very open and accepting school environment, so she found herself spending most of her time working on the managerial tasks of data analysis and reporting.

Principals must work within the parameters of the local school and district. Sparks-Norris (1997) indicated that one of the most important things a new principal can do is to take time learning about the past history and culture of the school, in other words to take a crash course in the cultural analysis of the school.

With Karen having been a member of her school community for 11 years as the school counselor prior to becoming the principal, she had a great knowledge of the

district and the school's history and culture. In fact, because she had such a close connection with the school she was able to realize immediately what aspects of the school she believed needed to change and what could stay the same. In addition, there was never any discussion about needing to understand the dynamics and politics of the district and community as a whole.

Karen's experience was completely different than the experience of Susan and Marty. As new citizens to their respective communities, Susan and Marty each had to go through many trials and tribulations as they learned how to navigate in the school and community on a daily basis.

The desire to be the curricular leader is evident early in the principalship. After reviewing her first year, Sparks-Norris (1997) explained how even though she wanted to be seen as the instructional leader during the first year, because of the heavy involvement in the day-to-day business of running a school, instructional leadership had to take a backseat to survival. Without a doubt, Susan, Marty, and Karen each anticipated and desired to be the instructional leader of the school.

Based upon their Educational Leadership programs and past leadership experiences, each of these principals felt confident in their abilities to lead their schools. Both Marty and Karen made it a priority early during their first year as principal to change the culture and climate of their schools. Similarly, Susan had great ambitions to work with her teachers to improve their overall teaching by concentrating on ensuring that a well-articulated curriculum was being taught each and every day. Unfortunately,

each of the principals also shared how issues related to completing managerial tasks often interfered with their instructional and curricular goals and vision.

### Recommendations for Professional Practice

Educational Leadership Programs are not focusing on middle level education so pre-service administrators have to depend on their own teaching and background experience as they start their first year of the middle school principalship.

Educational Leadership programs must do a better job of preparing pre-service administrators for the middle school principalship. To do this, Educational Leadership programs must concentrate on helping future principals understand the physical, cognitive, and social/emotional development of pre-adolescent students and how these areas impact their educational needs. In addition, Educational Leadership programs must ensure that future principals understand the beliefs behind Middle School philosophy and the programmatical concepts and structures of a middle school setting. This can be accomplished in two ways. First, by hiring professors to teach in Educational Leadership programs that have personal experience in middle school administration. The second way is to have authentic, practical educational experiences associated with the middle school principalship, specifically within an internship or practicum experience at the middle level. If pre-service administrators have this basic knowledge, they will be in a better position to truly be the Instructional Leader of a middle school.

Along with the added emphasis on the middle level principalship provided by Educational Leadership programs prior to the hiring of the first year middle school principal, State departments of Education and State School Administrators Organizations

need to continue with the professional development of first year middle school principals by providing on-going educational opportunities and trainings throughout the first year of the principalship directly focused on the day-to-day operations that go into leading a middle school. This will help first year principals continue learning how to improve their skills as they directly assume the responsibilities of middle school leadership.

For the First Year Principal, Problems are Unavoidable and Will Happen.

The principalship is a difficult position to hold. Because of this fact, Educational Leadership programs should work to give a realistic image of the job. This means both the positives of the job and the negatives. Pre-service administrators need to know all of the problems they will face on a day-to-day basis prior to accepting their first principalship. If pre-service administrators understand the difficulties they will encounter adjusting to the new principalship, managing the demands of time, and dealing with managerial responsibilities, for example, they will be in a much stronger position to find success during their first year on the job.

Once a person is hired as the new principal, individual school districts must work to create a smooth transition for the person into the school community. School districts need to realize that the new principal is going to need mentoring about the school district, school building, and community as a whole. It should be a goal of the school district to create these mentoring relationships prior to the arrival of the new principal.

Another needed area of support for a new middle school principal is having a strong superintendent who will also work to ease the transition into the new position. Using the school calendar effectively can do this. At the start of the school year, a new

middle school principal needs time to get to know his or her staff, learn about the curriculum, policies and procedures, and interact with the students. This will help build the relationships that are so important at the middle level. Knowing this, superintendents should, to the best of his/her ability, carefully structure and schedule meetings and events to avoid pulling the new middle school principal out of the building at the start of the year. In addition, superintendents should use the time between sporting seasons as an advantageous time to schedule professional development and planning. The most favorable time for this would be the time between basketball season and track season.

State Administration Associations should also work to support new middle school principals by creating mentoring programs that align new middle school principals with nearby veteran middle school principals. By giving a new middle school principal the opportunity to communicate, ask questions, and receive guidance from someone who has a firm understanding of the challenges of leading a middle school, the new middle school principal will be in much greater position to deal with problems that may develop during the first year of administration.

Finally, State Departments of Education need to create a month-by-month timeline of events that highlight specific due dates for important reports and paperwork assigned by State and Federal governments. Along with this, State Departments of Education need to create a simple one page document or website that gives important resources to directly handle the most common problems that occur during the first year of the middle school principalship.

## Middle School Principals Must Have Current Knowledge of Middle School Philosophy and Concepts

In order to be an Instructional Leader and work with middle school teachers and preadolescent students effectively, the middle school principal must understand the basic components of middle school philosophy and how it drives nearly all decisions made in the middle school environment. To truly understand the importance of student developmental needs and how this impacts student learning and achievement is essential for a successful middle school principal. Because of this, as school districts begin the process of hiring a principal at the middle level, they must work hard to hire individuals that have direct experience teaching middle school-aged students and background training in middle level education. The more experience an individual has working in a true middle school environment, the more knowledge the individual will have to base decisions upon during the day-to-day operations of the school.

If an individual does not have direct experience teaching in a middle school environment or background training in middle level education, then Educational Leadership programs must work to supply their pre-service administrators with this knowledge, and then, additionally, supplement with high quality practicum and internship experiences at the middle school level. It is imperative that Educational Leadership programs build into their coursework a detailed explanation of the rationale behind the middle school concept and how the developmental needs of preadolescent students should drive all decisions of the Instructional Leader of the building. In addition, Educational Leadership programs need to ensure that preservice administrators

understand how the middle school is best served by certain organizational systems, such as teaming, interdisciplinary connections, and advisory programs. By integrating the basic foundations of middle school knowledge into the coursework of an Educational Leadership program, first year principals will obtain the knowledge, skills and confidence necessary to promote and advocate for acceptance and integration of the middle school concept with teachers, parents, and students.

In an attempt to build on the work done at the University level to educate pre-service administrators toward an understanding of middle school philosophy and concepts, national organizations devoted to middle level leadership such as the National Middle School Association (NMSA), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) need to continue offering professional development opportunities that directly impact middle level leadership. This is also something that individual state associations, State Departments of Education, and Local Education Agencies can achieve on a local, state, or regional level.

Finally, local school districts must allow release time for first year principals to take advantage of attending professional development trainings and conferences that are devoted to middle level leadership. This will give principals more information and training to deepen their knowledge and understanding as it relates to the middle school concept. It will also create networking opportunities for these new principals to build a collaborative group of professionals working in similar contexts to communicate throughout the first year of the principalship and potentially for years to come.



## The Most Discouraging Aspect to the Principalship is Attempting to Find Balance Between Ones Personal and Professional Life

The middle school principalship is a difficult job to undertake. On a daily basis the principal of a middle school is dealing with students who are going through major developmental changes in terms of their physical development, cognitive development, and social/emotional development. Because there is so much change during this brief period of time, there is also so much stress happening to middle school students, parents/guardians of middle school students, and teachers of middle school students. As the leader of the middle school, the principal is the person ultimately responsible to keep the school running as smoothly and efficiently as possible.

However, along with the daily pressures of the middle school principalship, there are also the pressures associated with one's personal life. To find a positive balance between these two worlds is an incredible undertaking, especially if there are spouses and children involved in this process.

As an institution working to prepare individuals for the middle school principalship, Educational Leadership programs must take every opportunity to portray the principalship in a realistic light. Preservice administrators and, if applicable, their family members, must understand the realities of the job prior to entering into the leadership position. If Educational Leadership programs explain both the positive and negative aspects to the principalship, pre-service administrators and their families, if they have families, will have the time to organize and prepare for all of the ups and downs that will happen during the first year of administrative duties. After Educational Leadership

programs have given a realistic view of the middle school principalship, these schools must then support the pre-service administrator by giving him or her multiple strategies to cope with the difficulties of maintaining balance between one's professional life and ones personal life.

School districts are another group that must work to help first year middle school principals maintain a positive balance between the professional and personal life. In terms of the school district, this starts during the hiring process for the middle school principal position. It is during the hiring process that school districts have an obligation to explain to each prospective employee the positives and negatives associated with the school that the person is likely to encounter if they accept the position. This will also give the future principal an opportunity to organize and prepare for the specific school setting he or she is going to lead.

Once an individual is hired as a middle school principal, the school district needs to realistically and compassionately respond to the demands placed upon the new principal. There needs to be a respectful understanding of, and value placed on, the personal life of the principal. Because of this, school districts should work to minimize the amount of after school hour responsibilities placed upon the principal. For example, if new principals were not required to supervise all of the extracurricular activities that take place during the school year, there would be a tremendous amount of time added to the personal life of the new administrator. This extra "me-time" and/or "family time" for the middle school principal would pay tremendous dividends to the school in overall morale and energy that could be applied to the daily work of school leadership.

In addition, school superintendents need to be cognizant of the calendar school year as it applies to the life of the new middle school principal. Superintendents need to realize that there is a tremendous amount of pressure for a new principal during the first months of the new school year. Not only is the new principal learning about the existing policies and procedures of the school and district, he or she is also transitioning into a new community and home. In consideration of these special circumstances, superintendents need to attempt to limit the number of meetings and professional activities to the greatest degree possible. This will give the new principal a chance to transition to the new community and to new living arrangements as well as possible.

Further, superintendents need to think about using the breaks in between extracurricular sports seasons to focus upon the major managerial tasks involved in school leadership. During the break between fall and winter sports, schools should attempt to administer their standardized testing programs. During the break between winter and spring sports, principals, with the support of their superintendent, should attempt to administer most of their formal teacher evaluations and paperwork. If used correctly, these natural breaks in the school year can be a great benefit for the new principal working to maintain balance between their professional and personal life.

#### Recommendations for Future Study

During the selection process for this study, the decision was made to follow the journey of first year principals working in small, rural schools. Based upon this decision, a recommendation for further study would be to look at small schools in urban settings. It would be interesting to compare and contrast the first year experience of administrative

duty between these two settings in an attempt to discover if any similarities or differences occur.

Similar future studies could look at diverse geographical regions of the United States and other countries around the world. This study looked at the lived experience of three first year middle school principals in Iowa. However, it would be interesting to discover the similarities and differences first year middle school principals experience based upon the geographical location of their school.

By random chance, during the selection process for this study, the three principals participating all were female. This leads to a third recommendation for future study. It would be important to take the time to follow the lived experience of first year male middle school principals. By making this choice, further information would be added to the body of knowledge relating to possible gender-related challenges that could be addressed prior to the first year of the principalship. Are there special circumstances, rewards, and/or challenges faced by men or women related to leadership on a personal and professional basis?

A fourth area of future study would be to interview middle school principals at different stages of their professional career. If data were collected on the fifth year, tenth year, or twentieth year of the middle school principalship would there be a commonalities reported about the struggles and successes that occur with more years of experience?

In a similar avenue, professionally relevant and useful information would be discovered if a longitudinal study was done on a group of principals. If a researcher followed the principals for not only one year, but continued on into the second year, data

would be collected to demonstrate the effect of continuing years of administrative experience at the middle school on the lived experience of the principal.

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APPENDIX  
PERMISSION TO CONDUCT STUDY GRANTED BY UNIVERSITY OF  
NORTHERN IOWA HUMAN PARTICIPANTS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Re: Protocol #08-0009

**Subject:** Re: Protocol #08-009

**From:** "Dr. Susan Etscheidt" <susan.etscheidt@uni.edu>

**Date:** Thr, 31 Jul 2008 14:20:09 -0500

**To:** cryer <jd.cryer@uni.edu>

**CC:** Rodney.dieser@uni.edu, Anita M Kleppe <Anita.Kleppe@uni.edu>

Mr. Cryer:

Thank you for your responses. These revisions address the issues I raised earlier. You may begin recruiting participants when ready.

Your project "How Do Beginning Middle School Administrators Navigate through Their First Year of the Principalship? [Protocol #08-009] has been approved following procedures for expedited review specified at 45 C.F.R. S 46.110. For your project, the applicable expedited review category is:

Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Best wishes for success with this research project. If you have further questions about the Human Participants Review policies or procedures, please contact me at [susan.etscheidt@uni.edu](mailto:susan.etscheidt@uni.edu) or Anita Kleppe, IRB Administrator, at 319-273-6148 or email [anita.kleppe@uni.edu](mailto:anita.kleppe@uni.edu) You will receive a formal letter for your files in the near future.

Good luck with your study.

Susan Etscheidt, Ph.D.  
UNI Institutional Review Board